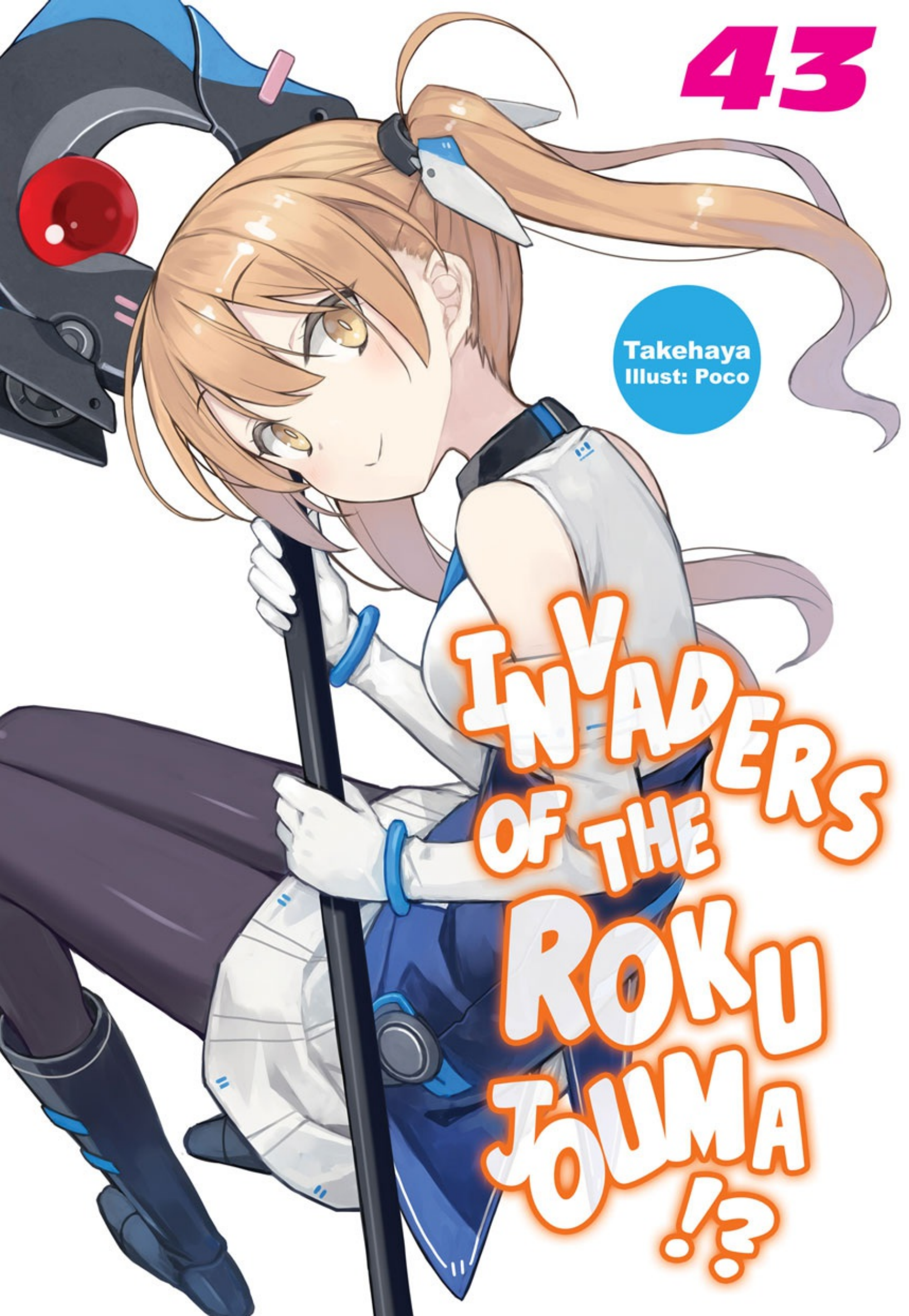


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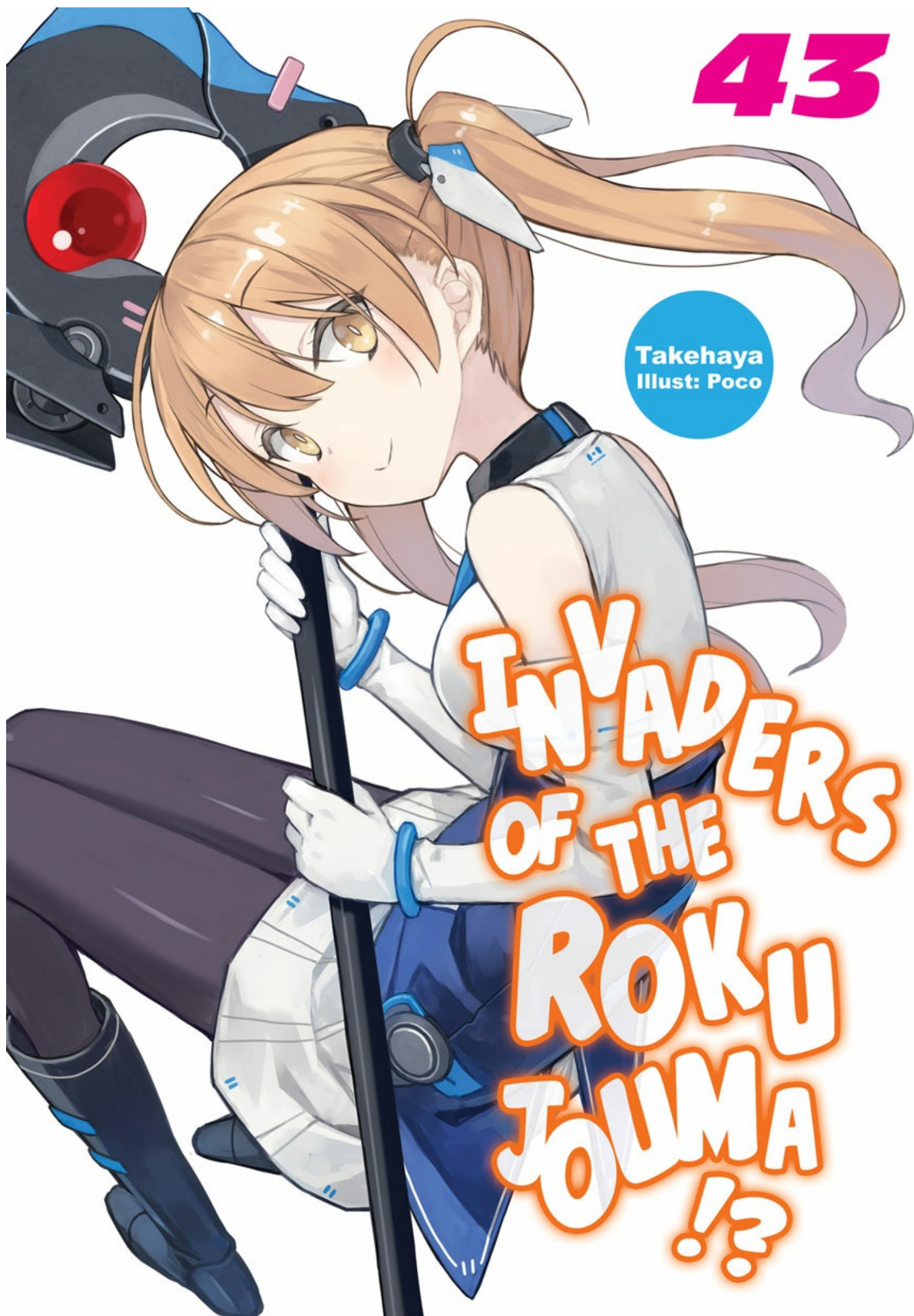
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JUMA
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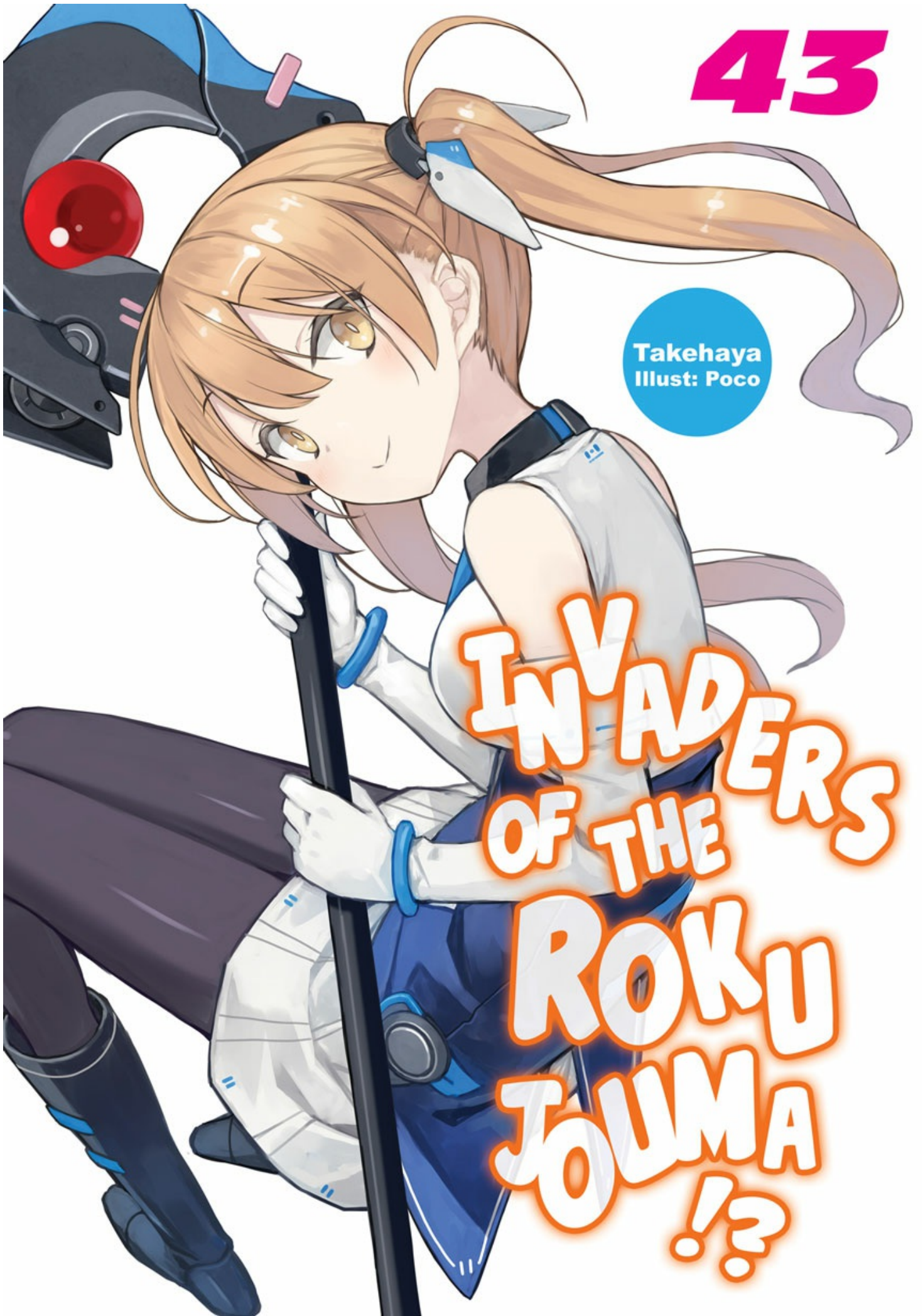
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Takehaya
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INVADERS
OF THE
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!?



Koutarou and Ralgwin

Friday, November 4th

Thanks to Harumi freezing Ralgwin's wound with her magic, there was no danger to his life. However, the wound was large and he had needed surgery to reconstruct the bones and close the wound. Anesthetics were used, so he didn't wake up until a few days later.

The first thing Ralgwin said when he woke up was, "I never thought of myself as the kind of man with strong attachments, who would want it all to be a dream, but...it doesn't seem too surprising..."

Upon waking, he had immediately confirmed the state of his shoulder and found himself disappointed when he discovered the injury. That disappointment was stronger than the pain.

"Those kinds of feelings tend to drag on. It took me a long time to break free from it," somebody answered Ralgwin's muttering.

Naturally, Ralgwin hadn't expected an answer, and he was even more surprised by who had spoken. "Blue Knight?!"

"Morning, Ralgwin."

The voice belonged to Koutarou. He was standing at the entrance to the hospital room and slowly approached the bed after greeting Ralgwin.

"They were saying you would wake up soon, so I came to check up on you. Looks like I timed it perfectly."

Despite visiting his enemy, Koutarou was wearing casual clothes and was unarmed. But such precautions weren't necessary. Ralgwin was seriously injured and had no intention of resisting.

He did, however, still have the spirit for sarcasm. "Did you come to laugh at the loser?" He acknowledged his defeat but was still a leader. His rebellious spirit was alive and well.

Koutarou shook his head in response. “No, I just wanted to talk with you a little more.”

“That’s what coming to laugh at me means... So, what did you want to ask?”

There had to be a lot of things that Koutarou would want to pry out of Ralgwin considering his position. So with a bitter smile, Ralgwin straightened his posture. His shoulder hurt a little as he did, but he didn’t let it show.

“What kind of a man was Vandarion to you?” Koutarou casually asked.

It was a completely unexpected question for Ralgwin, and the surprise was apparent on his face. He had been sure Koutarou would ask where his forces were hiding or something. “I’m...surprised. Did you really come here just to talk, Blue Knight?”

But with a wry smile, Ralgwin started talking, explaining what kind of a man Marswell Dayora Vandarion was to him.

Vandarion was typically known as a harsh and fierce general. He took to the front himself, leading a powerful army and achieving many deeds, such as putting down rebellions. There were times when he’d been criticized for going too far, but his achievements were praised and had earned him respect.

Yet, hidden within him was a desire to take over Forthorthe for himself. With that revelation, his reputation became that of an ambitious and fierce general who rebelled against the royal families.

“No matter how evil the man, they are rarely evil to all without exception. To me, he was a stern but kind teacher, and a goal to strive towards.”

Ralgwin was Vandarion’s nephew. Because of that, they’d known each other since Ralgwin was young. Vandarion had played with him and even taught him, and the sight of the rows of medals on the older man’s breast was something Ralgwin had admired. He couldn’t help but want to be like him.

“Yet, Vandarion rebelled. Why would someone of your caliber take part in that?” Koutarou could understand Ralgwin’s feelings. But he didn’t understand why he would join the rebellion. As far as Koutarou knew, Ralgwin wasn’t the type to do something so drastic without much consideration.

“At first, I was like the people, simply taking my uncle at his word.” Ralgwin hadn’t been aware of Vandarion’s ambitions at first. He’d fallen for his lies like everyone else, which was why he’d volunteered to join the battle.

“You should have noticed at some point.”

“Of course. I was shocked. I couldn’t believe it.”

Ralgwin wasn’t incompetent, so in the process of pursuing Elfaria, he had realized that Vandarion was actually rebelling. The surprise he had felt was like the ground at his feet breaking open.

“So, why continue?”

“I was already at the point of no return...but I also chose to follow my heart. I couldn’t betray my uncle. I wanted to help him win. After all...he was my idol.”

By the time that Ralgwin had caught on to reality, Vandarion was already launching a major operation with the military. Naturally, Ralgwin was one of its core members, so when he finally noticed, it was too late to turn back. And with Vandarion being the ringleader, he wanted to help him win, as defeat would no doubt mean a death sentence for his uncle. Although Vandarion had staked his life on his aspiration, to Ralgwin, he was also a stern but kind uncle, and his hero. Ralgwin just couldn’t bring himself to betray him.

“So, he was important enough to you that you were willing to turn a blind eye to what he was doing.”

“I’m sure you know how I felt.”

“Yeah. That would be Her Majesty, Alaia, to me.”

Koutarou wanted to help her, not because of her goal, but because he was moved by how she treasured the people above all else. That was why he wanted to help her win. He believed she was the kind of person who should lead a country. In the end, it was for Alaia’s sake. And while they had gone in a different direction, the same could be said for Vandarion and Ralgwin.

“In other words...our clash was inevitable.” Koutarou mused. If Vandarion failed halfway through his mission, Ralgwin would take up after him and continue the fight. Just like he continued to wield his sword as the Blue Knight

even now.

“Yes, indeed.”

As two people holding the same feeling facing each other, all they could do was clash. It was inescapable. Either one of them would have to discard their belief, or they would have to settle things once and for all. Naturally, it had turned into a major battle, and it was a miracle that both were still alive afterwards.

Koutarou nodded in understanding. “I’m satisfied with that; thank you.”

He had always wondered why Ralgwin had chosen to fight. Fasta’s support of the man had further cemented that feeling. But knowing Ralgwin’s motive now, Koutarou could understand.

“Hmph, I’ve done nothing to be thanked for.” Ralgwin remained calm, despite losing and facing a death sentence.

However, Koutarou didn’t find that strange. If he was caught by the enemy after fighting with all of his power for the sake of Alaia, Theia, or Elfaria, he would likely not have made a scene either.

“Let me just tell you one more thing.” On his way out, Koutarou spoke up once more, as if suddenly recalling something. “Fasta-san left.”

As someone who valued his subordinates, that should have been important information to Ralgwin, whose eyes opened wide upon hearing it.

“You didn’t arrest her?”

“The deal was that we would work together until we pulled you away from Grevanas and the Gray Knight.”

Koutarou and the others hadn’t captured Fasta and forced her to cooperate. She had come to them with a deal, and they had accepted it. Once their mutual task was done, Fasta had left and they were now back to being enemies.

“To pull me away, huh...” Ralgwin muttered.

“I’m sure you know why.”

“Yes. I rejected her suggestion, so this was the only option she had.”

Ralgwin recalled Fasta suggesting that they cut ties with Grevanas and the Gray Knight. She'd been desperate. He had rejected her, but she hadn't given up. Having come to the conclusion that she couldn't save Ralgwin from within the organization, she had made a deal with Koutarou and the others. If their roles had been reversed, Ralgwin might have done the same, so he understood.

"But she's still hurt over many of her allies dying as a result," Koutarou noted.

"If Grevanas had taken action, a lot would have died regardless. There's no reason for her to worry about it. The only foolish thing was trying to save me."

With Grevanas having successfully resurrected someone, it was only a matter of time before they became enemies. Ralgwin's forces would fight against the other's army of undead. Worst case, the dead would only add to Grevanas's army. Ralgwin choosing to continue to fight despite the disadvantage meant that there would inevitably be a large number of casualties. If there was any problem, it was that Fasta was risking her life for Ralgwin.

"You underestimate yourself too much. You are to Fasta what Vandarion is to you," said Koutarou.

"If that's true, then she'll come to try and save me." Ralgwin looked out through the hospital window. All he could see was the blue sky, but his gaze was unexpectedly gentle.

"That's all... Bye, Ralgwin."

Koutarou said and turned his back on him.

He'd gotten answers to all his questions. And he'd conveyed everything he wanted. He'd promised Theia and Kiriha that he'd leave right away after finishing everything that was necessary. Koutarou was forbidden from talking about too much, both to keep their secrets and to keep himself safe.

"Don't tell me you came all this way just to tell me that."

"Of course not. I came to laugh at you."

"I'll...leave it at that." Ralgwin said and saw Koutarou off with a slight smile.

He knew that he couldn't say too much either. With Koutarou leaving, he was alone in his hospital room. For a while, he looked out at the sights outside the

window.

After returning from the hospital, Koutarou was deep in thought. He had tried to do a number of different things, but ultimately ended up stopping and thinking. Even now he was sitting on a sofa and drinking tea while pondering. His head was full of thoughts about Ralgwin and Fasta. They were both enemies who had done unforgivable things, but after meeting them away from the battlefield, Koutarou found that they weren't all that different.

It's only natural. This isn't some story or fairy tale. There aren't many who are pure villains...

Koutarou was sure that he wasn't in the wrong, but he wasn't convinced that the other side was entirely wrong either. Sure, their actions and methods were bad, but he didn't think the root cause of their actions was necessarily so. Supporting somebody who meant a lot to them, be it Ralgwin or Fasta, wasn't a bad thing at its core. That was the kind of enemy Koutarou and the others had been fighting. It had been the case since Forthorthe had made contact with Earth. Only a few enemies were completely evil. Was it really right to fight against such normal people? But what other methods were there?

Thoughts like that were rushing through Koutarou's head. That was when a hand reached out and pressed on his nose.

"Huh?!" Koutarou leaned back in surprise.

"Gyah?!" The culprit also leaned back, startled by his surprise.

There, the unique rainbow-colored hair entered Koutarou's field of view.

"Wait, what's the matter, Nalfa-san?"

The nose-pressing culprit was Nalfa. When she heard Koutarou, she froze.

"Ah, uh, uhm...I lost at rock paper scissors, so I came to play a prank on you, Koutarou-sama..." She shrunk with an apologetic look.

Rock paper scissors?

That rang a bell for Koutarou. "Rock paper scissors" meant other people, and Koutarou looked behind Nalfa.

“Good job, Nal-chan! That kind of thing is important!”

“That’s a true samurai! A real man—I mean, a perfect woman!”

“You’re very brave, Nalfa-saaan.”

He saw Kotori, Sanae and Yurika.

So that’s how it is. I need to keep it together...

Upon seeing them, Koutarou immediately understood what was going on. They were worried about him.



“Don’t make Nalfa-san do stupid things,” he told them.

“Koutarou, I object to this unfair criticism!” Sanae protested.

“Kou-niisan, it was actually Nal-chan who said she wanted to do something about your scary expression,” Kotori interjected.

“And then she lost at rock paper scissors, so she mustered all of her courage,” Yurika explained.

“I see. Then I guess it can’t be helped... I’m sorry about my scary expression, Nalfa-san,” Koutarou answered. He’d have been angry if the other girls had forced her, but there was no problem if Nalfa herself had suggested it. After a small sigh, Koutarou smiled at Nalfa.

“Oh, no...I just...” Nalfa began.

“I know. Thank you.” Koutarou smacked his face and got up from the sofa. Considering why Nalfa had done what she did, nothing good would come from him being deep in thought. He walked up to Kotori and the others and asked, “So, what are you guys doing?”

Nalfa timidly followed behind him, a smile on her face. A few others were looking at Koutarou and Nalfa. They were Clanm, Harumi, and Ruth. They’d also noticed Koutarou’s state but had been relatively passive and hesitated to make a move. However, once they sensed the change in Koutarou’s bearing, they tore their eyes away from him. He was back to normal, so they got back to their own jobs in relief.

“Hmm hmm...” Kenji was the same. In his case, he’d gotten to see an example of the girls protecting Koutarou’s heart, so he was relieved in a different sense. And with a slight laugh he got back to reading his book.

Kotori and Nalfa had met with Sanae and the others in April this year. Strictly speaking, they’d met before, but that was the first time they had properly interacted, so they knew what had happened since April but hadn’t heard more than a rough explanation of the two years before that.

“That’s why you’re feeling a sense of urgency, right, Nal-chan? You’ll eventually have to get in between Kou-niisan and the others? At the very least

to get him to cheat on them with you,” Kotori commented.

“Wha— Kotori?!”

It was the truth. But with Kotori so casually exposing her, Nalfa practically had tears in her eyes.

Meanwhile, Koutarou was somewhat unsatisfied with part of what Kotori had said. “I’m not going to cheat on anyone. Even if I did end up dating Nalfa-san, I would do so sincerely.”

“Now, now. I understand what you’re trying to say, but that’s not the point here, Kou-niisan. So bear with me,” said Kotori.

“Kin-chan... Okay, I guess...”

“It takes a lot of courage to treat Koutarou-sama like that, Kotori...” Nalfa told her.

Kotori so casually silencing Koutarou had come as a shock to a Forthorthian like Nalfa, who looked at Kotori with her eyes wide open.

“Anyway,” Kotori continued, “that’s why we should talk to everyone. There’s nothing you can do unless you know how tall the mountain you need to climb is.” She spoke with an unconcerned smile.

Even her own brother, Kenji, watched her with an expression of wry amusement. *It’s about time Kotori realizes there won’t be any other men who can make her look like that...* he thought to himself.

While she was improving, Kotori was typically introverted. But when she was with Koutarou, she seemed so unrestrained. The reason was that she was absolutely convinced that it was okay to show her real self to him. So Kenji was sure the answer was staring her in the face. Yet she herself was saying that she didn’t understand love, and Kenji couldn’t help but find that gap in perception funny.

“Love is war! Learn yourself and learn your enemy—those are the iron-clad principles of battle! That’s the spirit!” Theia cried.

“Your love is a little suspicious... Is that really ‘love’?” asked Koutarou.

“Haaaah?! You shouldn’t have said that! How could a man suspect the love of

his own woman?!”

“What kind of woman attacks anything she doesn’t like?!”

Bang, punch, crash!

A fight suddenly broke out between Koutarou and Theia. When they began, Sanae and Yurika moved the tea table in a fashion that suggested they were accustomed to this. Naturally, that was just to avoid getting caught up in the fight. They then started talking again as if nothing was happening.

“All right, so who should we ask next?” Sanae said with a cup of hot chocolate. Nalfa’s eyes, however, were locked on Koutarou and Theia doing battle. The sight of a hero and princess engaging in a fistfight was quite shocking, even if it wasn’t new to her.

“Nalfa?” Kotori prompted her.

“Ah, s-sorry... I was just a little overwhelmed by the sight...”

“Then, Nal-chan, why not ask about Theiamillis-san?”

“Ah, y-yes. Sanae-sama, please tell me about Princess Theia.” Nalfa getting overwhelmed by the fight was because she didn’t really understand so it made sense to clarify the situation for her.

“Well, you see, Theia was super selfish at the start,” Sanae explained. She continued on to recall their first encounter with Theia, who had only seen herself and thought of Earthlings as nothing but neanderthals back then. “She tried to solve everything with violence, sometimes breaking the Earth or not.”

Kotori was shocked. “Was Theiamillis-san really trying to invade?!” That was the first time she had heard about it, and her eyes opened wide.

“Yeah. But that was only because she was worried about her mom and wanted to finish up her trial as soon as possible.”

“She was as hasty then as she is now...” said Yurika.

“Trial?” Kotori’s eyes opened wide once more. This was another word she hadn’t expected.

Nalfa knew the answer this time, though. “Kotori, in order to earn succession

rights, Forthorthe royalty have to complete a trial.”

“I see... So that’s why she came to Earth?”

“Yeah. Apparently her trial was to take over Koutarou’s room,” said Sanae.

“But Theia-san was terrible at explaining so she was ridiculous,” Yurika added.

“So were you.” Sanae could vividly remember when Yurika had first appeared. That was partially because Koutarou and Sanae didn’t believe in magic, but also because Yurika wasn’t very “magical girl-like.” As a result, nobody listened to her explanation, and she was largely ignored.

“That’s enough about me!” Yurika replied. That said, she now knew that she needed to continue believing and doing what she had to. Not bringing it out whenever it was convenient was a sure sign of her growth.

“They’ve always been like that, getting into a fight whenever something happens,” Sanae noted.

“I see...” Nalfa murmured.

The original relationship that had formed between Koutarou and Theia continued even now. It wasn’t the simple relationship between a knight and a princess. That was a surprising truth to Nalfa, but she could understand after learning about their history.

“Back then, Satomi-san was calling Theia-chan ‘Tulip,’” Yurika said.

“That’s a pretty cute nickname,” said Kotori.

“Kotori, what is a tulip?”

“It’s a flower on Earth,” she told Nalfa.

“It looks like this, ho!”

“It’s a member of the lily family and blooms in early spring, with a lot of people planting them in their flower beds, ho!”

The haniwas projected an image into the air. The lights shooting out from their eyes showed a flower bed where red tulips were planted. Nalfa broke out into a smile when she saw it.

“Ah, I’ve seen that flower on Earth!”

“But Sanae-san, why a tulip? I can’t imagine it’s the kind of name he would use when they were on bad terms...” Kotori tilted her head in confusion. She couldn’t imagine a tulip in a negative sense. If anything, it sounded like a compliment. A dainty tulip was something that would be used by a pair that got along.

“That was because of my special attack, Sanae-chan Tulip,” Sanae explained.

“Sanae-chan Tulip?” Kotori and Nalfa asked in unison, and looked at each other.

“Theia was rampaging around, so I lifted up her skirt and tied it up above her to keep her from moving.”

“It looked like this, ho!”

“It looks like a tulip bud, ho!”

The haniwas changed the image they were projecting. The new image was the Sanae-chan Tulip of two years ago. Since the haniwas were present at the time, they had recorded it.

“Ah, that does look like a tulip,” Kotori admitted.

“Right?!”

“So, the princess’s dress would turn into a white tulip,” Nalfa continued.

“Hehehe, but Theia was unhappy with it. Right Theia?” said Sanae.

“N-No comment!” Theia, out of breath, answered in the middle of her fight against Koutarou, although she wasn’t unhappy about being turned into a tulip, but rather with her past self. Yet, it was true that she was immature, so she couldn’t force Sanae and the others to shut up.

“I think the bunny-print underwear she was wearing then was cute, though,” Yurika noted.

“No comment!” Theia’s face turned a little red. That was mostly because of the physical strain, but it was also an embarrassing discussion in a lot of ways.

“Let us show mercy. Why don’t we end this conversation here, everyone,” Sanae announced.

Out of consideration for Theia's state of mind, she suggested that they change the topic. Sanae wasn't the same as she had been two years ago either. She wasn't childish enough to continue while knowing that it troubled Theia.

"Your consideration is much appreciated." Theia smiled, then got back to fighting Koutarou in high spirits.

"Hm, very good." Sanae pompously leaned back. That adorable part of her was the same as always.

Nalfa timidly asked her a different question. "Then...what were you like at first, Sanae-sama?" She had no objection to changing the topic. It was only natural that a Forthorthian like her would want to help Theia if she was troubled.

"I was pretty bad too." Sanae nodded with a knowing look on her face. She had said it as if it were someone else's problem. "Before Koutarou showed up, I was chasing out people who were trying to rent the room, so I probably caused a lot of trouble for Shizuka."

"Sanae-chan, that's not something you should say with so much confidence..." The Sanae-san being astral-projected scolded her. Yet Sanae-chan seemed unconcerned.

"Oh yeah, what were you doing back then?"

"I was going back and forth between the hospital and my home."

"Oh, right; back then there were two Sanae-chans and we just didn't know about it."

The conversation turned to the subject of Sanae. Kiriha and Ruth were working on politics, but when they heard Sanae and the others talking, they stopped to take a break.

"Back then, I never could have imagined working in Forthorthe like this." Kiriha said and smiled before bringing the cup in her hand to her mouth. In it was tea that Ruth had only just poured.

Meanwhile, Ruth returned the cup she held to its saucer and smiled like Kiriha. "I was hoping something like this would happen from the start."

Not long after their first meeting, Ruth had hoped that they would be able to win over Koutarou and the other girls. As Theia had a lot of enemies, she'd needed allies she could trust. While their origin and the circumstances that had led to this were completely unexpected, Ruth had gotten what she wanted.

"So, I guess you really got us, Ruth," Kiriha replied.

"It wasn't something intentional, it just appears that way when you look at the result."

Kiriha and Ruth exchanged peaceful smiles. There were still a lot of problems, but there was a big difference in heart and soul compared to two years ago. There was a strange sense of relief as everything fit into place.

Clan, however, didn't agree with their opinion. "Kii, Pardomshiha, I believe our results will take a stranger turn."

She was being serious. She used the computer that she'd been working on to show the girls the basis for her belief.

The Empress's Work

Friday, November 4th

Clan was watching a live broadcast from Forthorthe's Parliament. A new law related to the PAF that she had created was being discussed. The matter at hand was the introduction of tax incentives for purchasing PAF or other similar new technologies for medical use, and depending on the outcome of the deliberations, there might even be a need to develop a less expensive PAF. It was an important issue that Clan couldn't ignore either as royalty or as an engineer.

Fortunately, the deliberations on the new law, which had been the focus of Clan's attention, went off without a hitch. They had decided in favor of making it easier for citizens to purchase PAF. Satisfied with the result, Clan took a break and absentmindedly looked on at a newly begun discussion. She wasn't particularly interested in it at first, but then something interesting happened.

"The next questioner is Marclay from the House of Commons. The floor is yours."

"Pardon me. I am Marclay."

Forthorthe's Parliament had a bicameral system, made up of the House of Commons and House of Lords. The House of Commons had more legislative authority, with the House of Lords functioning as a type of checking mechanism. The person currently standing at the speaker's desk was Marclay from the House of Commons.

"The other day, a letter was delivered to my office. The sender was a news reporter named Danesford Laren, and it regarded an interpretation of a particular law. After close consideration of its contents, I concluded that it is a very important matter that requires a fair and sincere response."

A hologram of Danesford Laren was displayed behind Marclay. He was a skilled reporter with plenty of scoops under his belt—and also Nalfa's brother. The moment she saw him, Clan had a bad feeling about it.

“Normally, it’s standard for a question from a journalist to be answered during a press conference, but this matter contains important truths and questions that have a direct connection to the benefit of the people. So I notified the Speaker that I would like to take some of my time to use this occasion to ask the relevant authorities.”

Regardless of their achievements, a journalist’s question would normally not be brought up during the Parliament’s deliberation. There were, of course, situations where the government cooperated with a reporter in the pursuit of justice, but that didn’t seem to be the case this time.

Clan’s bad feeling grew stronger. Danesford’s name in particular stuck out to her. He’d once elicited a blunderous statement from Theia, so she couldn’t quell her concern.

“As of the day before yesterday, I, the Speaker, after negotiations with the Ministry of Justice, concluded that it would be appropriate to deliberate this matter at the Parliament.”

The Speaker was backing up Marclay. A deliberation meant that the proceedings would be officially recorded. Statements made would come with a legal responsibility. That was how important the issue at hand was, and it was a sign that this was something the people should know.

“Marclay, please continue.”

“I shall. The question I received from Danesford concerned the legal interpretation of the Blue Knight’s special exception.”

When she heard that, Clan’s expression changed. *This is about Veltlion’s special exception?*

The question related to a serious matter concerning Koutarou. Moreover, that question had come from Danesford. Once she realized that, Clan decided to inform Koutarou and the others.

The deliberation began by clarifying how the Blue Knight’s special exception functioned legally. The conclusion came down to: The rights given to the Blue Knight by Alaia can not be removed. As it was written into the constitution, it took priority over the law. The deliberation itself concerned how to resolve the

Blue Knight's special exception clashing with the law.

"...so even if the law is amended, the rights granted to the Blue Knight in the past would still be kept, is that correct, Minister of Justice?"

The debate over the law and the special exception was about to end. They were currently confirming whether or not a legal reform restricting the rights of the citizens would also restrict the Blue Knight's rights.

"The Ministry of Justice's interpretation is that the Blue Knight's rights would be maintained. If I were to give an example... If the Blue Knight were to cultivate land that had no owner, he would obtain ownership based on the cultivation laws of the past."

"Allow me to confirm, has that land cultivation law been abolished at present?"

"It has indeed. Today, the law allowing private ownership of cultivated land is no longer in effect."

The law in question had existed two thousand years prior. Back then, Forthorthe had had a small economy and little national power. Realizing that it would be difficult to prevent an invasion from another country in that state, the emperor had created a bold law dictating that whoever cleared unowned wilderness or forests and developed farmland would gain ownership of them. Originally, the wilderness had to be owned before it could be turned into farmland, so the cost was too high. Therefore, the emperor had hoped that lowering the cost would speed up development.

Based on the results, the law worked well. Land was practically being given away for free, so the nation lost a lot at first, but with the increase in farmland came an increase in tax yields, so the free land ultimately led to an uptick in profit. Later on, once significant improvement had been made, the law was abolished—since there was only so much land, they couldn't afford to overdo it.

However, the Blue Knight could still claim ownership of free land if he cultivated it, because his special exception prevented that right from being removed.

"Thank you very much. Now, in light of our discussion so far, let us move on

to the main question.”

They had finished talking about how the Blue Knight’s special exception affected the law, but there was still more to cover. Specifically, Marclay’s question—meaning the question sent in by Danesford. They were moving on to the main topic.

“During Forthorthe’s tumultuous period, it was very important for royalty, nobility, and knights to leave behind descendants. With war and disease running rampant, the death rate was exceedingly high and important people had a duty to leave behind more offspring.”

The question concerned the war after Alaia had ascended the throne. Back then, Forthorthe, like Japan during its warring states period, had spent most of its time on war. And with sanitation problems at the time, the average life expectancy was less than forty years. This caused problems with succession.

“Because of this, the laws allowed royalty, nobility, and knights to take multiple wives.”

Without an heir, the family line would die out. That was true for both royalty and knights. The only solution was to have more children; therefore, royals, nobles, and knights were allowed multiple wives. Or rather, it was their duty. That was how they protected the family lineage, and in other words, the nation.

“Those laws were naturally abolished and no longer exist. With wars and epidemics being far less common, life expectancy has increased.”

Forthorthe now had a monogamous system. Polygamy was only necessary during wars or epidemics, and once society restabilized, the system became unnecessary. As the overall awareness of rights began to improve, the law was abolished shortly before the nation’s modernization.

“So, I would like to pose a question, Minister of Justice,” Marclay said and paused to take a breath. He then slowly continued. “We all know that the Blue Knight is faithful and has not decided on a spouse...but in light of the discussion so far, is there any need for him to decide on a single partner?”

The moment Marclay posed that question, silence filled the chamber. Before now, the Parliament had been quiet but not completely silent, with neighbors

whispering and exchanging opinions. Now, however, it was quiet enough to hear a pin drop. The question had caught the attention of every member, and likely every person watching the broadcast as well.

“Minister of Justice.”

“Yes, the Ministry of Justice interprets the question as such. Based on old, already abolished laws, the Blue Knight can take multiple wives.”

In that moment, cheers rang throughout the room, as if to shake the very building. That was a breach of etiquette in the Forthorthe Parliament, but nobody minded. Even the speaker raised their fist up high with a smile. The Blue Knight could marry the princesses right away—that was Danesford’s new scoop, which would shake Forthorthe.

Because of this, the session was called to a close, with proceedings scheduled to continue the next day. All parties were likely busy changing the contents of their deliberations. Naturally, all the news outlets were covering the same topic. The majority opinion was that Danesford would likely clutch the Journalist of the Year award next year as well. With the citizens stirred to a feverish excitement, congratulations for the Blue Knight’s marriage were put up everywhere. The entire empire was in an uproar, and so were Koutarou and the others.

“Wh-What the hell is this?!” Koutarou almost fell over in surprise from the commotion that had seemingly come out of nowhere. Fortunately, he was able to brace himself with his arms and avoided falling.

Meanwhile, Theia was in a great mood as she clung to Koutarou’s back. “Well done, Danesford Laren! I always knew you were a fine journalist!” She’d been attacking Koutarou with a sleeper hold, but now she was clinging to him with her legs and left arm, thrusting her right fist up in a cheer.

“You said you hated Danesford...”

“I do not. Someone who serves the empire so well deserves nothing but praise.”

“You shameless little—”

“Ohohohoho!”

While the two argued, Sanae ran up to them, her eyes sparkling. “Koutarou, Koutarou! When are we having the ceremony?! I want to wear a dress!”

“Forthorthe’s laws have nothing to do with me! I’m Japanese!”

“Whaaaaaat?! Let’s at least have the dress and suit made!” If anything, Sanae was more interested in the wedding dress than the ceremony. Of course, she wasn’t the only one full of enthusiasm.

“I am not sure if my bad feeling was right or wrong... Anyway, I am at a loss...” Clan sighed in embarrassment as she watched the Parliament fall into confusion. It wasn’t like she was unhappy that one of their obstacles had disappeared. If anything, she’d wished for it. But it had happened so fast and so suddenly... She wasn’t mentally prepared, and confusion hit her before joy.

“Kiriha-sama, what do you think about this?” asked Ruth.

“I think things are going to get interesting.”

“You seem sort of indifferent.”

“This is a secret, but I was planning on getting married even if I had to force it,” Kiriha answered.

“Actually, I was too.”

“Nevertheless, I am glad that it can be done properly now.”

“Yes, I feel the same way.”

The pair were relatively unconcerned. They had already decided how they would live their lives, and this incident had little influence on that. Of course, it wasn’t like they weren’t happy; they just weren’t as affected as Theia and the others.

“Maki-chaan, it looks like we can become Satomi-san’s wives too,” Yurika announced. She was relieved. She’d actually been a little worried that she didn’t measure up to the other girls like Harumi or Theia. But if the law was on her side, it didn’t look like she would have to return to her life of instant noodles.

“Wives?” Reality hadn’t sunk in for Maki yet. She had only been thinking about protecting Koutarou, so she couldn’t imagine getting married to him and

starting a family.

“Meow!”

Maki did, however, have a vague wish of wanting to start a family and become a mother. Nappy played a big part in that. And Nappy being in a good mood was in response to Maki’s feelings.

“Sakuraba-senpai, won’t this just push Satomi-kun into a corner?” asked Shizuka. Unlike the group of girls rejoicing, she was a little worried. Laws aside, Koutarou’s ethical viewpoint hadn’t changed.

“If that time comes, we will step back. It’s not the formalities that we need to protect,” Harumi said and smiled at the worrying Shizuka. She didn’t feel that formalities were a big deal, and she wanted to protect their love and bonds.

“I’m no match for you, Sakuraba-senpai...” Shizuka answered with a wry smile. She could feel Harumi’s deep love and absolute trust in Koutarou, which was why the other girl didn’t care about the system. Harumi was convinced that it would have no impact on the outcome, and faced with her certainty, Shizuka had no choice but to raise the white flag.

“Isn’t that great, Nal-chan? Now the rest is up to you!” Kotori said with a bright smile. She was worried. She’d thought that Koutarou would be able to accept Nalfa but hadn’t been confident that there was enough time. They would have had to use more forceful means in that case, but fortunately, it didn’t look like that would be necessary.

“I... I’ll do my best...” Nalfa cast her gaze down and blushed, but she was still relieved. She had been worrying about the time frame, just like Kotori. *Brother, this is too early for such a scoop...*

Her brother’s scoop had cut off her escape route. She could no longer use a lack of time as an excuse. There was no longer any need to give up, so in a sense, she was being cornered.

“The number of females becoming mates, huh? Humans worry about strange things. It’s different for us dragons.”

“It’s love, ho!”

“I can understand love. We have that too.”

“The process of evolution must have developed a different conception of how to form a herd, ho!”

“Hmm, how interesting.”

The haniwas and Alunaya spoke as if it didn’t concern them. Nevertheless, seeing their friends enjoy themselves was a welcome sight, so they looked on with amusement.

“Kou, it’s time to accept the consequences.” Kenji was also enjoying the situation. It had absolutely nothing to do with him, and it wasn’t a bad thing either. Koutarou was normally teasing him about his problems with women, so now was the time for his counterattack.

“Shut it!” Koutarou replied.

“I look forward to speaking at the wedding. I’ll be making full use of the techniques I learned at drama club to give a moving speech, so get excited. Even *you* will cry.”

“No, thank you! There’s no need for you to think about that yet!”

“But serious talk, Kou... Is there even a point in resisting anymore? They’ll probably change the laws if they need to.”

“I don’t care! I’ll do things at my own pace!” Koutarou alone tried to resist the situation. Unfortunately, as long as he was in Forthorthe, he was on his own when it came to this issue. As Danesford’s huge scoop shook the empire, Koutarou wondered if the scoop had truly originated with the journalist.

“You put this into his head, didn’t you?” Koutarou began at the start of the meeting.

Elfaria, the current empress of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, shook her head with a smile. “I wouldn’t dare.” However, her smile was so cheerful and phony that Koutarou’s suspicions only grew stronger.

“Liar! You’re the only one who’d aim for something like this!”

He suspected that Elfaria had presented Danesford with the news, which

would lead to a further revitalized economy and support for the royal families, so there were a lot of benefits for her.

“You don’t understand your own value, Layous-sama. The people of Forthorthe are constantly thinking of ways to tie you down here. Danesford’s actions are just a representation of the people’s desires.” With a wry smile, Elfaria shook her head again. She was insisting that the scoop had manifested through public sentiment, but Koutarou couldn’t accept it.

“The will of the people is awfully convenient for you.”

Elfaria always wanted a festive atmosphere. As empress, it was her job to bring the economy up. Stirring up a consumer mentality among the citizens was especially important now, so soon after the civil war.

“To be honest, I won’t say that I’m not happy,” she answered.

“See!”

“But please consider that if I had presented this scoop to Danesford, I would have chosen a more effective time and place for it.”

“That’s—”

Koutarou’s objections stopped short. He had a feeling that Elfaria was right about that. For example, she would have chosen the launching ceremony for the new Blue Knight, or maybe even somebody’s birthday. Either way, she would have used a big event to make the announcement and would have made the festivities grander. Or perhaps she would have used the situation to ease the shock of some major incident—for example, if the old Vandarion faction launched an attack that created many casualties and left the citizens depressed.

“You’re right... Sorry for doubting you.”

He had to concede that the timing wasn’t the greatest for the announcement to have the biggest effect. It would likely end up being little more than a bit of commotion. That was too sloppy for any plan Elfaria might make, so Koutarou acknowledged his mistake and apologized.

The empress, however, was unhappy. “It is pretty irritating that you would accept my explanation so readily.” Rather than trusting Elfaria, it seemed more

like Koutarou held her cunning and calculating nature in high regard. As a woman, she wasn't thrilled with the prospect.

"What do you want from me? Actually, what do you people even want me to do?"

Koutarou was troubled by the situation. While he understood that Elfaria wasn't the one pulling the strings, he had no clue what her goals were.

"You can do as you please. Just know the Parliament can guarantee that nothing will stand in your way."

Forthorthe's citizens were ready to give Koutarou everything, if he desired it. That was in part because of the rule Alaia had put in place, and in part because of the vast debt Forthorthe had to him. But it wasn't the main reason. Allowing Koutarou so much came from the citizens' trust in him. They believed he wouldn't abuse the rules or trample on their good will.

"Come on..."

"You have done enough to deserve it. Considering how Forthorthe would have ended up if Vandarion's coup had succeeded, a blunder or some selfishness on your end is no problem, Layous-sama."

Given what Koutarou had achieved, the people were willing to overlook quite a lot. The price for preventing Vandarion's dictatorship was enormous, and if what had happened with Alaia was included, the debt was too big to even consider.

"Selfishness, huh? So, for example... if I were to say that I wanted to marry you, would that happen too?"

How selfish could he really be? The biggest selfishness that Koutarou could come up with on the spot was marrying the empress... meaning he would become the husband of the current empress and obtain massive influence. It could even be considered a takeover of the empire.

Elfaria was at a loss for a response, which was unusual. She understood what Koutarou was saying. He was only talking about gaining authority by marrying the empress, the sovereign. But for just a moment, Elfaria considered something else that left her speechless.

“That’s right. If you wished for it...” In the end, she answered the question as Koutarou had meant it, although she mixed in a little bit of her true intentions. The law took no issue with the Blue Knight marrying the empress. Of course, it would require the consent of both sides; there was no way it could be forced. Yet Elfaria only mentioned Koutarou’s intentions, and the reason for that was the same reason she was at a loss.

“Wait... you mean my privileges have that much power?”

Elfaria’s answer had gone beyond Koutarou’s imagination. He was too surprised to notice Elfaria’s delicate feelings behind her answer.

“Yes. They were decided by Empress Alaia, of all people, after all.”

Elfaria smiled as if nothing had happened. Although they had unintentionally overflowed, these weren’t emotions that she wanted Koutarou to be aware of. She didn’t want to be a burden to him.

“Jeez... Being told I can do whatever I want is the most troubling thing of all.”

If even a wedding with the empress was allowed, Koutarou could probably demand anything he wanted. It was an overwhelming sense of authority, and at the same time an overwhelming amount of expectation from the citizens. Terrifyingly, if Koutarou were to misuse that power, he could cause chaos on a galactic scale. It was far too dangerous for a mere high school student.

“I feel the same all the time.” Elfaria laughed happily. She was already back to her usual self.

“I guess the empress has it rough...”

Koutarou realized that Elfaria’s job was rather similar to the problem he himself was faced with now. And as empress, the danger in her case was even greater than in Koutarou’s... not to mention she had to use that power on a daily basis.

Even though it looks like she’s always playing around, Elle is a proper empress...

Koutarou felt like that was something to be respected.

Elfaria chuckled. “Not as rough as a legendary hero.”

From her point of view, an empress's job wasn't nearly as hard. Elfaria was the one hundred and twentieth empress, but there were only a handful of heroes. Naturally, she didn't have the confidence that she could save Forthorthe like Koutarou had, especially when he'd done so twice over. Elfaria couldn't help but find it funny that he didn't understand that.

Of course, Koutarou hadn't stopped by Elfaria's office just to complain and drink tea. He'd come for a proper reason, which began with listening to a report from Ceilēshu, who had come into the office later.

"I would like to start by reporting on DKI Logistics related activities," she announced.

Lately, Ceilēshu had been working as something of a secretary to Elfaria. Due to circumstances during the civil war, she'd already abandoned her claim to the throne. She'd once told Koutarou that this kind of work suited her, and though Koutarou hadn't thought much of it back then, he could understand how she felt now that he was starting to understand how hard the empress had it.

"I see, so the transport ships have started running?"

"Yes. Since last week, DKI Logistics and its business partners have started improving logistics in remote regions of space," Ceilēshu said fluently. Her voice was beautiful and clear, almost like she was singing. She was a daughter of the Sarioon family, and they had long emphasized the arts, so she'd trained her voice from an early age.

"Partners?"

"Yes. DKI Logistics doesn't have enough transport vessels on its own to meet the increasing demand, so part of the volume is being covered by outsourcing to companies that meet strict standards."

DKI Logistics had plenty of transport vessels around Forthorthe, but they couldn't all be sent to the remote regions of space, as the previous transport routes still needed to be maintained. The number of vessels required fell far short of the number of new vessels the corporation had bought, so the company outsourced some of their operations to others in the same business.

"Because of that, corporations that have cleared the examination are using

the Blue Knight-related business certification mark on the transport ships flying around the remote regions,” Ceilēshu said as she projected new footage. It was a space station in a remote region that served as a local hub. Lots of space ships could be seen docking, and those that had finished unloading were departing. Their hulls had not only their own corporation’s logo, but also a cute one with the motif of a knight in blue armor. That was the “Blue Knight-related business certification mark.”

“We are still being flooded with requests from corporations wishing to participate in the program.”

Forthorthe had a lot of corporations that worked in the transport industry. Large companies that operated in a large area in particular were rushing to obtain the mark. That mark served as a significant point of attraction for citizens. It also led to an increase in transportation routes in remote regions of space because companies that didn’t have any transportation routes to those locations couldn’t obtain the mark.

“What examinations?”

“We can’t approve any corporations that wish to make use of Layous-sama’s name for their own profit, so we examine them to ensure that they are legitimate organizations,” Elfaria clarified. She figured that if they were going to lend out the Blue Knight’s name, then the corporations should at least be clean. Those that didn’t meet this standard, such as companies with inadequate accounting surrounding their taxes, were rejected. In fact, there were cases of major corporations being rejected and then reapplying with a plan for improvement.

“I know that face... Elle, don’t tell me...”

Elfaria looked like she was enjoying herself. Her smile was practically saying “I got you,” so Koutarou had a hunch.

“Yes?”

“Is this what you were after from the start?!”

“What might you be talking about?” Elfaria wore a refreshing smile. It was truly beautiful and bright except that it smelled of trickery.

“Don’t play dumb! You made the mark so you could bring a scalpel to an industry that required improvement anyway, didn’t you?! You’re the one using my name to do business!”

Elfaria had been the one to suggest the mark. She'd said that it was to prevent anyone from misusing the Blue Knight's name, but there was actually more to it: to make citizens question corporations that transported to remote regions yet didn't have a mark. This led to an assumption that the corporation's internal situation made it impossible to apply for one. Therefore, the larger the corporation, the more they had to apply for certification.

It was essentially making use of Koutarou's fame to force a new standard on the transport industry—and without creating new laws, at that. It was ultimately just DKI Logistics demanding that its subcontractors confirm the legality of their business. That way, there was no need to go through Parliament and nobody would complain. It was a very easy way to achieve the same effect as changing the law.



“I wouldn’t dare. You are only looking at the results, Layous-sama.”

“Liar! Your face is telling a different story!”

“It happened to lead to an improvement in the transport industry, but it’s certainly not something I was aiming for.”

Elfaria looked like she was having the time of her life, wearing an adorable, child-like smile. Koutarou felt like he was talking to a friend around his age. Ceilēshu was looking at the two with half admiration, half exasperation.

I am amazed that Her Majesty thought this far ahead...

Ceilēshu wasn’t confident that she’d be able to proceed with things as effectively as Elfaria. Even with a powerful card like the Blue Knight in hand, she wouldn’t be able to use it that way. Ceilēshu once again felt that she wasn’t suited for politics, and that giving up her right to the throne was the correct call.

Besides... Layous-sama is amazing, noticing all that just from looking at Her Majesty’s face...

There was a strange bond between Elfaria and Koutarou that didn’t allow anyone to step in between them. Koutarou wasn’t looking at her the way that he looked at a coworker or superior. Nor was it like he was looking at an enemy or rival. Ceilēshu struggled to describe it, but it was because of that bond that they were in this situation. It was completely different from the normal dynamic between a knight and empress.

“I wonder...” said Koutarou.

“It really was by chance. And it certainly isn’t anything bad,” Elfaria insisted.

“That’s... I guess that’s true.”

Koutarou wasn’t actually angry. As long as PAF’s profits were returned to the world, it was necessary to confirm the legality of the chosen method. He was simply complaining about her hidden agenda taking him by surprise.

“Next time, talk to me about it first rather than springing it on me.”

“It truly was just by chance.”

“If it wasn’t for that awfully cutesy face, I would have believed you.”

“Oh my.”

Elfaria would only show herself like that to him. It was different from when she was with Theia, and if there were a few more people around, she wouldn't act like that even in front of Koutarou. Ceilēshu could only hope that he realized it.

“Oh well, you really are just... No, that's not right.” Koutarou sighed, but as he did, he realized something.

“What is it?”

“You are serving this country well. I'm sure Her Majesty Alaia would rejoice.”

In the end, Elfaria was working for the country. She might have been an empress with significant authority, but there was still a limit to what she could do and how much time she had. An ace up the sleeve was necessary from time to time, given how difficult politics could be. Koutarou understood that now. So his words changed the nature of Elfaria's smile just a little.

“It is an honor to hear you say that, Layous-sama.”

After Ceilēshu confirmed that the two had reached a lull, she smiled a little before continuing with her report. “An unexpected result of the mark is that tourists have begun to show up to look at the transport ships.”

At the moment, only ships in the remote regions carried the mark, and there were cases of tourists traveling to see the mark for themselves. Local businesses were busy responding to the increased demand in tourism by preparing a space for taking commemorative pictures with the ships and more.

“How could anyone expect that?” Koutarou had never imagined that tourists would take an interest. All he could do was smile wryly at the report.

“I wonder if we should start a passenger line. The transport routes are losing money, after all.” Elfaria believed that if there was a flow of people, they should take advantage of it. A restoration was about more than just reconstructing buildings; they also needed people to spend money.

“On our planet, I believe they modify transport ships to make space for passengers.” Koutarou thought of the ferries that were being run on Earth. They

were typically transport ships, but there were cases of some being remodeled to make room for passengers. While they might not fit many people, they could still transport some. He figured space ships might allow for the same.

“That could work as a temporary solution.” Elfaria also felt that it might be better to add cabins to transport ships rather than preparing separate passenger ships, which could prove to be a problem if the demand decreased. But with modifications, a transport ship could simply be returned to normal.

Koutarou and Elfaria’s discussion covered a broad range of issues. Starting with transport ships, they discussed the futures of DKI and PAF, military matters, and more. Koutarou was the commander-in-chief and Elfaria was the empress, so it was not surprising that they had a lot to discuss.

“Do you think they’ll make a move to break him out too?”

They were currently talking about Ralgwin. He had regained consciousness just the other day, and an interrogation would take place after he was able to recover further. He was in a hospital for the time being but was scheduled to be moved to an isolated facility for serious criminals. Ralgwin would be put to trial, but he was an important source of information, so it was necessary to keep him safe in a secure location and prevent him from escaping.

“I am sure that Fasta-san will plan to attack when he is being transferred. It is more likely than her attacking the facility he will be moved to.”

They couldn’t afford to ignore that the enemy plotting to free him. And considering the circumstances, there were likely multiple factions going after him: the old Vandarion faction as well as a smaller organization under Fasta.

“I thought so. Then the question is if they can time their plan match to the transfer.

“If anything, it is highly likely that Grevanas and the Gray Knight will be absent during the transfer.”

“True. With their forces, they could attack the facility itself.”

“In their case, it would be better to wait until Ralgwin is fully healed.”

“Yeah. They wouldn’t need to take such a risk when he’s only just woken up.”

Koutarou and Elfaria were thinking that it would likely only be Fasta going after Ralgwin during the transfer. With her lack of forces, it would be smarter to attack then, when there were less guards on hand. Conversely, the old Vandarion faction had a much larger force, and it would be riskier to get Ralgwin caught up in the commotion after he had only just left the intensive care unit. Nothing good would come of forcibly rescuing him, risking his wounds reopening and him ultimately dying. In their case, it would be best to wait until his wounds had healed.

“Of course, there’s also going to be the problem of the leader of the anti-government organizations, so there’s still a chance they will attack,” said Elfaria.

“Right, they have that to consider too,” Koutarou agreed.

Ralgwin wasn’t just an important person—him being the leader of the organization complicated the situation. It might have looked like it was merely the old Vandarion faction, but in reality, there were the military organization led by Ralgwin and several merged anti-government organizations. So it was hard to imagine they would function for a long period of time without a leader. If they took too long, the person in charge would no doubt change. And if they failed, the organization would fall apart.

Elfaria believed it was possible that they might rush the rescue to avoid that possibility. “Is something the matter?” she asked.

“This is between us... I want Fasta-san to be safe, but at the same time, it feels wrong to reduce the guard.”

Koutarou had complicated feelings on the matter. According to laws and procedures, Ralgwin should be put to death. But deep down he wanted Fasta to achieve her goal. He couldn’t help it after seeing her dedication up close.

“Considering the circumstances, we would need to go beyond the standards of serious criminals,” Elfaria warned him. She had heard about Fasta’s situation, and she did feel a degree of sympathy. If Koutarou was captured by the enemy, Elfaria would want to save him no matter her foe. But she went against her feelings and spoke of stricter measures. She was truly an empress.

“We’ll need to keep a quick response team on standby in case Grevanas and the Gray Knight were to make a move,” Koutarou replied.

Just like Elfaria was an empress, he was the Blue Knight. He ultimately stuck to his beliefs. It wasn't a matter of who the enemy was; it was who he didn't want to betray that mattered.

"Then I will instruct the military to form a plan of interception."

"That's good. Hey, Elle..." Koutarou had been thinking about something for a long while, and after a heavy sigh, he looked at Elfaria.

"Yes?"

"Are you always worrying about things like this?"

He had come to understand how hard her job was. There was no infallible decision. In this case, they were facing a conflict between emotion and law. Even beyond this particular case, there were always choices that were at odds, and Elfaria was being torn between conflicting demands. She was being pressed to make a decision without enough time to consider everything thoroughly. There was no guarantee that her decision was correct, but as empress, she had to believe it was.

"Yes," she answered.

"And then you sent Theia to me... I'm starting to understand how hard it is for you. Politics is a difficult game, huh?"

Koutarou smiled wryly. Truthfully, he didn't think that he would be able to live under constant pressure like that. And it told him how amazing Elfaria was. The fate of a galaxy rested on her shoulders. He had no choice but to acknowledge it.

"Why are you acting like it has nothing to do with you?" she asked.

"It doesn't. My job is to fight. I'm not suited for politics."

Elfaria seemed unhappy, but Koutarou was relieved that he was a knight. All he had to do was protect her. He could consult with her, but he felt the role of a knight suited him well.

"That might be true now, if you marry a royal, politics will become your job too, Layous-sama."

Elfaria's eyes sparkled. If Koutarou was to marry Theia or Clan, he would

become royalty too, which meant political activities would become a daily routine. He was only able to act like it had nothing to do with him right now.

“I-I don’t have any intention of getting married yet!” Koutarou involuntarily flinched at the disturbing gleam he sensed in Elfaria’s eyes.

“Ah, yes. You won’t marry ‘yet’. Hehehe...”

Elfaria’s smile beamed at him. There was no way Koutarou would discard Theia or Clan. Or Alaia and Harumi. So even if left to his own devices, he would voluntarily jump into the spider’s web. Elfaria was convinced of that. Not to mention she was laying several traps to speed up the process. The only question was how many traps Koutarou would fall into, and when it happened, she would wrap him in several layers of soft and warm threads, refusing to let him go.

Signs of Approaching Battle

Friday, November 4th

Fasta was currently near the hospital where Ralgwin was being cared for. She was surveying the area in preparation for her rescue. Ultimately, she had proved Koutarou and Elfaria's prediction correct. She was standing on the roof of a tall building, looking down on Fornorn.

"There aren't many places suited for an ambush..."

If Fasta were to launch her plan, there were only three locations that could really be attacked. The hospital, the isolated facility, and the route between them—and Fasta couldn't attack the first two, not on her own. Operating solo, there was a limit to the number of allies she could employ, which meant she wouldn't be able to attack the hospital or isolated facilities where Imperial Army forces would be waiting for them.

That left only the path between the two. Fasta predicted the route that Ralgwin would be transported along and found several locations that could work.

"Then the question becomes how Ralgwin-sama will be moved..."

But here a problem unique to Forthorthe came up. Compared to Earth, Forthorthe's means of transport were far more evolved, including flying buses. Even when it came to cars, there were those with wheels and those that hovered. As for the sky, there were helicopters, planes, and vehicles that used distortion fields to float. Without knowing what would be used to move Ralgwin, it would be a struggle to rescue him.

"No, the Blue Knight knows that I will attack. So they might even use military vehicles to move him."

And there were even more problems. Since Ralgwin was the leader of an anti-government organization, it was likely that military vehicles would join in too. She would even have to consider the possibility of warships. If a vehicle with

VTOL and the latest technology was used, she had little chance of victory. Infantry would be a mix of a tank and fighter jet, after all, in which case they would need something more than just a straightforward attack.

“There’s an urgent need to determine what the method of transport will be. Leaving things to others is frustrating, but...”

Fasta began looking into how Ralgwin would be moved. Given the lack of available personnel, she needed to rely on informants. She didn’t like how unreliable people could be, but she had other things she needed to prepare, so she had to take the risk.

“Scariest of all are Grevanas and the Gray Knight... I hope they will just sit back...”

Fasta couldn’t be sure of rescuing Ralgwin because the Imperial Army was strong. But there were also Grevanas and the Gray Knight, who were just as much of a threat, not only because of the power they held, but also due to the lack of information she had on them. She didn’t know what they might do. She didn’t even know if they would attack on the same day or at some other point. No matter how much she prepared, it might all go to waste depending on how they moved. That was a major risk to Fasta’s rescue operation.

“And there is the matter of Ralgwin-sama’s condition...”

Another thing to worry about was that she didn’t know how much Ralgwin would have healed by the time he was moved. Depending on the circumstances, a violent rescue operation might end up killing him. And while it was unlikely with the Blue Knight in charge, they might intentionally choose to move him before his wounds healed.

“I might need to make a bold move too...”

With so much in doubt, Fasta began feeling like success was unlikely if she proceeded normally. So she would use uncertainty to clash against them instead. In order to save Ralgwin, she needed a bold move that not even the Imperial Army or Grevanas and the Gray Knight could imagine.

“I wonder how Ralgwin-sama is doing...”

When she could no longer think, Fasta looked over at the hospital. Until just a

little while ago, Ralgwin had been in the intensive care unit. Now, he'd woken back up and was being kept in a private room. Fasta knew his location, but she couldn't reach him. The guard was too tight. Neither Ralgwin escaping on his own nor Fasta sneaking inside were possible. That fact frustrated her.

"I wonder how serious he was about waiting but not expecting anything..."

There was something that had always been on Fasta's mind: the last words they had exchanged. Instead of blaming Fasta, he had said that he would wait for her to rescue him. But perhaps that was because they were in front of the enemy. Perhaps he was actually extremely angry but had maintained his dignity for the sake of his image.

"It makes no difference. If this goes well, I will do anything Ralgwin-sama says."

There was no guarantee that the rescue would work. But if she pulled it off, Fasta would obey Ralgwin, even if he demanded her execution. Considering what she had done, she couldn't complain and would gladly oblige. At least that would mean that her rescue had worked.

After Ralgwin's capture, the old Vandarion faction had plunged into chaos. As Elfaria had pointed out, they weren't a monolith. They were only being kept together by Ralgwin's leadership. And with him out of the picture, the groups had started to fight for authority.

"We're not getting anywhere without a leader!"

"We need to decide on a new leader quickly!"

"But that won't be you!"

"I followed Lord Vandarion himself! Ralgwin was a relative of his, but I would never serve under you!"

"What?!"

The old Vandarion faction had been kept together by Vandarion's power and Ralgwin's leadership. Without those, the internal power struggle was surfacing. It was a natural progression, considering they were separate groups trying to

maintain their individuality, but it wasn't something that Grevanas and the Gray Knight could overlook.

"Chaos might be my desire...but this is a problem."

"This is nothing to laugh about, Gray Knight-dono."

Grevanas and the Gray Knight had been given a base of operation by Ralgwin. Without that base, their position would be unsteady. They had planned to part ways with him eventually, but that was after enough preparations had been made. To them, this was a little too soon for Ralgwin to have exited the stage.

Or perhaps that was even Ralgwin's goal... The Gray Knight thought of something. Ralgwin needed them, but the opposite was also true. At the moment, they both needed Ralgwin's support, so he might have made his gamble before they were ready to make their last move, not only to corner them, but also to frustrate them. And if someone were to rise to the occasion during that opening, Ralgwin's wishes might still be fulfilled.

"Curse you, Ralgwin. Why would you be so rash..." Grevanas was baring his emotions without a hint of his usual mild-mannered demeanor. He had ended up having to take a few steps back when he was just in front of his goal, and he was more angry with Ralgwin than the situation.

"Then you'll have to do something yourself. That's what you've been preparing for isn't it?" the Gray Knight said indifferently. He had no need to rush. He might end up being forced to step back from his goal, but he was fine with taking more time. He would have preferred to hurry along, but as someone who valued chaos, he didn't believe there was any need to rush, even against time. And that was what led to their difference in attitude.

"Now I must undertake this with insufficient preparation..." Grevanas grumbled.

"That's a failure as a researcher, but it's not a careful researcher that's needed right now. Rather, we need a leader who is ready to set out to win."

"I will have to disagree with you there. I don't want to be a leader myself. This is about who I want to bring back."

"It's the same thing. You will need to find a way to make that happen."

“Jeez... I need Ralgwin to come back soon...”

Like the Gray Knight said, Grevanas had been preparing for something like this, but he had expected it to happen a little later, so his preparations weren't complete. He couldn't afford to say that, however, and got to his feet.

Grevanas knew that his appearance inspired fear in people. That was why he had slowly worked on increasing his allies. Having the bare minimum of cooperators would adversely affect his operations in Forthorthe. He was expanding his network by supporting soldiers in battle and healing those who were injured. Technology in Forthorthe was far more advanced, and at first glance, there didn't seem to be a need for magic. That was certainly true for weapons and armor. However, raising others' abilities was still valuable. Moving faster than normal and being able to aim better made weapons even more dangerous. The soldiers were surprised at first but had ultimately welcomed it.

With the combination of Forthorthe's medical devices and Grevanas's magic, he was able to save a lot of lives. Weapons were more dangerous, and that also meant that injuries were more severe. So the reassurance that soldiers would receive adequate medical care off the battlefield was important.

Research into the field continued to develop and Grevanas was now able to even resurrect deceased soldiers. That was rare even in Forthorthe, and as a result, some soldiers began wanting to work for him. They were soldiers who wanted to repay him for reviving them, or those who sought resurrection in case something happened.

Grevanas was also functioning as a point of contact for soldiers who had nowhere to turn. He accepted personnel who had been removed from their responsibilities. A notable example was the head of a certain production facility. He had been made to take responsibility for the accident and was demoted, but Grevanas had accepted him as an assistant. And there were plenty more examples like that.

The finishing touch was using mana to brainwash them. Naturally, controlling a lot of people was difficult, and controlling them at all times was unrealistic. It would be bad to do repeatedly to the point where people got suspicious. So the brainwashing was limited to a battalion commander-class person following

orders under specific conditions. That was a big help during discussions and voting.

Through various such methods, Grevanas had achieved the support of many soldiers. Unable to ignore the voices of the people on the ground, he had ended up with leadership over the old Vandarion faction, but it was only temporary, and no one knew that better than Grevanas himself.

His taking charge wasn't bad for the Gray Knight. It would help speed up the other's goals. So the words the Gray Knight had fired at Grevanas were a compliment, even if they had sounded indifferent.

"You've done well for yourself, Grevanas."

"Oho ho ho, it turns out saving people is good to do."

Grevanas' spiel on human life had played a big part in his success. Soldiers naturally wanted a leader who respected their wills and valued their lives. That was the same reason that they had supported Ralgwin, and he'd snatched their trust.

"As if. They were just lucky your human experiments didn't fail."

"Not at all. If I were to fail even once, I would have the reputation of a disgusting magician, so I needed to be extremely careful." Grevanas left behind obvious results from his resurrection and healing. He was aware of how others saw him, so it would be difficult for him to earn their respect if he acted normally. Knowing that, he'd slowly expanded his influence, earning him the helm.

"Good job, then."

"But I can not let my guard down even now. We are still in a precarious situation."

While Grevanas might have gotten control of the old Vandarion faction, it was only temporary. The fires of the power struggle were still smoldering. Not to mention the final push that had gotten him his position was his suggestion that they rescue Ralgwin. Naturally, that meant a lot to the soldiers, earning him their support. But he had also lost something because of that suggestion.

“So, the cost of your leadership is time,” the Gray Knight mused.

“Indeed.”

Grevanas had lost time. Since he had suggested the rescue to win the power struggle, Ralgwin would need to be recovered soon. If they took too long and the soldiers lost faith in him, chaos would return.

“That is why I would love your cooperation, Sir Knight.”

“I guess I have no choice. If you fall here, my own plans will take a big hit.”

“It is reassuring to hear you say that. I thank you.”

The Gray Knight wanted chaos and freedom, so confusion worked in his favor, but if Grevanas were to lose his leadership position, the Gray Knight would need to do a lot more work. So he decided to cooperate with Grevanas in order to more effectively create chaos.

Knowing that there was a high chance that Fasta would attempt a rescue, Koutarou and the others couldn't sit still and do nothing. If they stood by, they would never be able to face the people who had fallen in the battle against the Vandarion faction.

“Should we really be doing this? Fasta-san wasn't a bad person.”

The old Vandarion faction was merciless and would use despicable means to attack. But that didn't mean that everyone in the old Vandarion faction was evil. After their chance meeting with Fasta, Yurika pondered whether it was really okay to fight them.

“I know how you feel, Yurika-chan.” Nana, Yurika's master, felt the same way. Of course, it wasn't just Nana either. Everyone more or less agreed.

“But they have to take responsibility for what they have done,” said Nana.

“Responsibility...”

When Vandarion had led his forces, so many lives had been lost in the chaos. The battles hadn't been as big after Ralgwin took over, but people had still died. That fact didn't change regardless of whether there were decent people among them. They couldn't be forgiven simply for having a heart or it would imply it

was acceptable to change the status quo by force.

“But... But...isn’t it unfair to punish soldiers who are just following orders they can’t refuse?” Yurika asked.

The soldiers on Earth were isolated and forced to follow Ralgwin’s orders. The same was true for the Vandarion faction soldiers after they had become a rebel army. Since they might have been killed if they had refused, they’d had no other choice. Yurika couldn’t accept such soldiers being forced to take responsibility.

“It’s okay, Yurika.”

“Maki-chan?”

“The past is one thing, but in modern law, individual soldiers won’t have to take that much responsibility, although that might not be the case if they chose to do bad things on their own.”

Be it on Earth or Forthorthe, in the past, it wasn’t uncommon to hang enemy troops, even their families. But in modern times, the concept of human rights had evolved, and when individual soldiers weren’t given much of a choice, their crimes weren’t considered so harshly. Of course, that wouldn’t apply if they used military might for evil without orders from above. For example, one might be put to death for a massacre or smuggling drugs. But aside from that, individual soldiers were generally not charged with serious crimes. The worst sentences would be a few years in prison.

“Then what about Fasta-san?” Fasta had a higher position among the ones making the plans, so Yurika feared that she would face serious punishment, unlike rank-and-file soldiers.

Fasta-san is probably prepared for as much... but Yurika still... Guess I have no choice... Koutarou couldn’t stand watching her worry like that. He put his hand on her head and patted her a few times. “Don’t worry, Yurika. She’s serious like Ruth-san, so she wouldn’t do anything evil. Not to mention, she’s cooperated with us twice, which would be taken into consideration. So there’s nothing to worry about.”

Ralgwin was one thing, but Koutarou wasn’t particularly worried about Fasta. She was devoted to her role and her intention to protect her allies was clear.

She wouldn't commit any unnecessary crimes, and she had helped Koutarou and the others twice now, with the code for the transport ship and during the battle the other day. Koutarou felt like with that in mind, her crimes were less serious than that of other leaders.

"Really?" Yurika was still worried. She probably needed a little more reassurance.

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"You have. You're always tricking me," Yurika objected with a slight frown. He'd played jokes on her and tricked her during games before. Koutarou would, in fact, lie to Yurika from time to time. So even now he wasn't entirely trustworthy.

"I'm not talking about normally, but at serious moments."

"Well... I guess not?"

Koutarou wouldn't lie when it really mattered. Yurika was sure of that.

"That's the situation. And if what you're worrying about was to happen, we could just go save her."

There was just one thing that Koutarou was concerned about. *The problem is how an attempt to rescue Ralgwin will be interpreted legally... especially if people die. Don't be rash, Fasta-san...*

There was probably nothing wrong with Fasta as a soldier. However, now that she was operating on her own, the regulations for soldiers did not apply to her. She would be responsible for all of her actions. She could still be considered “a soldier” when cooperating with Koutarou and the others, but after that, the responsibility was her own.

Although Ralgwin was her savior, he was a serious criminal, and any attempt to rescue him would be seen as a challenge to the law, which was inevitably a serious charge. Consequences would be even more dire if there were casualties as a result of her actions.

When Koutarou asked Kiriha about it, she said she could only hope that nobody died. However, he chose not to bring that up to Yurika. It would only make her anxious, and there was nothing they could do about it. They could only pray that Fasta was the person they believed her to be. And even if Fasta were to end up in trouble despite causing no deaths and her cooperation with their side, Koutarou would step in. Ethically, it was the right thing to do.

“A-Are you sure we can do that?!” Yurika’s eyes opened wide. She was surprised by his declaration that he was willing to break the rules.

“What else can I do if this is important to you? It’s just got to be done.”

Koutarou typically hated breaking the rules, but he hated people suffering from the unreasonable more. Even worse if the situation was hurting others as well. The bottom line was, he couldn’t approve of the collapse of Alaia’s morals and was willing to turn a blind eye to the law if necessary. In this situation, he would do exactly that if Fasta attempted her rescue without any casualties, and especially if Yurika was concerned about it.

“Satomi-san... ehehehe... what a bad boy.” A smile returned to Yurika’s lips as if her worried expression from a moment ago had been a lie. “If that happens, you’ll become part of the evil magical girls.”

“I’ll take that as it comes.”

Neither the soldiers nor Fasta should be charged with too serious a crime. And if they were, there was nothing for Yurika to worry about since Koutarou would handle it. He had promised her as much.

“Let’s just focus on what we need to do,” he added.

“Okaaaay!”

Yurika would have felt bad if her own actions had resulted in Fasta and the others being captured and facing a grim fate. But there was nothing to fear now. Back in high spirits, she held her staff up high.

“Maki-chaan, I’m going to investigate the mana in this area.”

“Okay, I’m going to look for any monitoring devices.”

“Please do.”

They were currently near the hospital where Ralgwin was. Either Fasta or the old Vandarion faction were expected to attack during the transfer, so they had come to investigate. It was no exaggeration to say that the preparations for the attack had already begun, so they had to be ready. Knowing that, Koutarou had brought his two magic experts, Yurika and Maki, to check it out.

“Hehe.” Nana chuckled as she looked at the pair from behind.

“What’s so funny?” Koutarou asked.

“I have this image of you being stubborn... but you’re willing to break the rules for Yurika-chan.”

“It’s not necessarily just for Yurika’s sake.” He smiled wryly. Sure, it was largely for Yurika’s sake. She was just too kind. But it wasn’t the only reason.

“You mean the other girls also need it?”

“That too, but it’s mostly for my own sake.”

“So you’re actually worried about Fasta-san?”

“Yes, although considering my position, that’s a secret...”

Having gotten to know Fasta personally had played a big part in his feelings. Ralgwin facing the consequences of his own actions was one thing, but it didn’t sit right with Koutarou that Fasta might end up getting dragged down with him—even if Fasta herself was willing. So if she ended up in a hopeless situation and there was room for sympathy, Koutarou would take action.

Of course, it would be for the best to avoid such a scenario in the first place.

“Not to mention, the Blue Knight needs to show mercy,” said Nana.

“Yeah, I think I’ll make that my reason. Hate the crime, not the person.”

“Hehe, that’s cheating. Say, Satomi-san...”

“Yes?”

“If I was in trouble, would you break the rules for me too?” Nana tilted her head and stared at Koutarou from up close, prompting her long twintails to flutter. Her face was full of confidence, as if probing for something.

Without noticing what lay in her expression, Koutarou stopped to think for a moment. “Well, it’s not like you would ever get in trouble, Nana-san,” he concluded after thinking about it.

It was hard for him to imagine her ever getting into a dangerous situation to begin with. She was always easily taking her enemies apart, as was to be expected from a former genius magical girl.

“It’s a hypothetical question! Jeez!”

“Then I would break them. I’m not strict enough on rules to leave a child in danger.”

Koutarou thought back to Kii, when he couldn’t change history, and how he couldn’t leave her be. His answer wouldn’t change even if it was Nana instead.

“The way you instantly answered that kind of irritates me,” she muttered.

Being told he would save her because she was a child wasn’t exactly the answer she’d wanted. But she could understand what he meant. She knew that as a woman, she was incomplete. So while she gave Koutarou an unhappy stare, she didn’t object any further.

“You are a child, Nana-san. Sure, your achievements are amazing and you’re older than us... but no matter the outside, you are a child on the inside.”

Koutarou saw Nana as a child who had been forced to become an adult. Giving up on being a child wasn’t the same thing as growing up, so Nana was in a constant state of unbalance. While she acted like an adult, her heart was unfulfilled and asking for help. That was more than enough for Koutarou to break the rules.

“Boo... Then take responsibility for calling me a child.”

“Please let me off with buying you food at a festival.”

“That’s fine. It’s a promise.”

“Yes.”

“All right! I’m going too!” Nana smiled and chased after Yurika and Maki.

Hehehe, that also means a promise to go to a festival together, Satomi-san. Do you understand that?

At first, Nana had hated being treated like a child, but now it didn’t bother her as much as she implied. There weren’t many who would call her a child, considering her body and everything that had happened.

As they investigated, Nana and Maki made use of their military experience, while Yurika used magic and Koutarou primarily employed his psychic powers, the four of them splitting up the work to look for traces of any would-be attackers. If anyone found something that made them wonder, they regrouped to discuss it.

After repeating that process a few times, Maki came to a conclusion, which she shared with them. “Maki, that’s a military-grade monitoring device, isn’t it?” Clan replied. “It has thermo-optical camouflage and doesn’t emit any electromagnetic or gravitational waves. It’s not something you can easily find, so well done.”

“Nappy found it. Good job, Nappy.”

“Nyaa.”

The lead-up to this was the mysterious device that Nappy had discovered. Maki had relied on her experience to search places where she herself would plant bugs. At one of those locations, Nappy had started hissing at nothing. Confused, she had taken a look and found the camouflaged object. When she showed it to Clan, she had learned that it was a monitoring device.

“I am convinced this was put here by the enemy. In other words, someone will attack when Ralgwinn is being transferred,” Maki concluded.

If the Imperial Army had placed the device there, it would have had an

identification code or other information on it, but there was nothing of the sort—not to mention the Imperial Army had no need to hide it in the first place. They could just put it up where they pleased.

With all that in mind, the monitoring device was believed to belong to the enemy.

“Amazing. That must be those wild instincts, Nappy-chan.”

“Meow.”

“The question is *who*. Fasta or the old Vandarion faction?” Nana muttered. She had reached the same conclusion as Maki, and determining the culprit was important.

“There’s no trace of mana, so it might be Fasta-san.”

“I believe so too. That device is the kind that special forces prefer. It makes sense to assume Fasta-san would have those.”

The device was expensive and complex. It was too costly for normal squads to use and required specialized knowledge. That being the case, a cheaper device that was easier to use would have been deployed if it had been set up by a normal soldier. So its presence proved that it was likely placed by someone from special forces, meaning it was much more likely to belong to Fasta than the old Vandarion faction.

“Yurika, can you examine it from here without touching it?” Koutarou asked.

The others still hadn’t touched the device. Considering its purpose, touching or getting close to it would no doubt set off some kind of alarm. Only a kitten had been fussing around it, which shouldn’t have triggered any alarms yet. Koutarou and the others wanted to keep it that way, if possible.

“It’ll be hard, but I’ll try,” Yurika told them.

“Please. We’re counting on you,” Koutarou responded.

“Yes.” Yurika firmly nodded and started casting a spell. She was using information-type spells, trying to find traces of people who had been around the device in the past.

When Yurika’s making that kind of expression, it’s fine to leave it to her...

Based on how Yurika was acting, Koutarou knew she could handle it. Her passion varied wildly and when she was off her game, nothing would go well, but he had yet to see her fail when she was feeling so positive.

“You seem composed, Satomi-kun.”

“Nyaa.”

Maki approached Koutarou, with Nappy following behind her. Nappy had been the MVP in discovering the device, but his only interest was in Maki now.

“When Yurika acts like that, I know she’s on top of things.”

“Yes. She’s got the look of Nana-san’s disciple.”

“But she was terrible at first, trying to save herself and using me as a shield...” Koutarou thought back to two years ago as he stared at Yurika’s back. She was reliable now but had been the complete opposite back then.

“N-Nooooooooo! Please don’t come any closer!!”

“Hehehe, it’s okay, isn’t it?”

“I can’t stand ghosts!!”

“Come on. What’s the matter, magical girl Rainbow Yurika?”

Koutarou remembered how Yurika used to run when she faced hardships, leaving others to solve the problem. Even against Sanae she had hidden behind Koutarou’s back, which was why he hadn’t listened to her. She hadn’t looked like a magical girl and had been completely different back then. If Yurika had acted like she did now, Koutarou and the others probably would have cooperated with her sooner.

“Meow.”

“Satomi-kun, when did you start believing in Yurika?”

Koutarou narrowed his eyes in nostalgia as Maki picked up Nappy.

“It started with the beetles. That was a little before you came, Aika-san.”

“Beetles? Ah, you mean the one she was looking after for a friend...” She had heard the story. It was a strange event that got brought up from time to time.

“Yes, exactly; a friend was moving, so she was looking after three beetles,” Koutarou said as he reminisced.

Yurika had been carrying a plastic breeding case and looking like she might cry. Inside were three beetles called Hercules, Atlas, and Caucasus. Being as kind as she was, she had ended up looking after them temporarily, and if that was all there was to it, it wouldn’t have been a problem.

“Unfortunately, that was just after your little incident with Pardomshiha, so your room was nothing but a death trap for those beetles,” Clan chimed in over the comms. She was helping with the investigation remotely, but right now there was nothing she could do but wait for the results of Yurika’s investigation.

“You’re well informed,” Koutarou replied.

“I was another one of the victims, remember?”

“Ah, oh yeah, we were fighting back then.”

“It’s a past that I’d rather forget.”

As a beetle lover, Koutarou had mistaken Ruth for a tree full of beetles in his sleep, and since then, beetles were treated as dangerous objects. If the grenade—the three beetles in the breeding case—had entered Ruth’s line of sight, they would have been blown up.

“But she still managed to protect them until the end. She never did give up. She knew that she had to protect them,” Koutarou noted.

They were just three bugs, but that was why Yurika had had to protect their small lives. She had been entrusted with them, and she fought to keep them safe until the end. And that had brought about a slight change in Koutarou’s view of her. It was her efforts then that had led to him trusting her later.

“You probably know the rest from there, Aika-san.”

“Hehe, beetles, huh? I guess they were to her what you were to me.”

“Nyaa,” Nappy offered.

“Well, I suppose so.”

As Koutarou nodded, Yurika returned to the group. Her investigation had

ended for the time being.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“It’s nothing. More importantly, did you find anything?” Koutarou would have liked to have reminisced a little more, but there were bigger things to prioritize, so he quickly grew serious.

“Just one thing,” Yurika told them. “Someone left behind footprints. They belong to a woman, and a rather tall one, I think.”

Whoever had set up the device must have been quite careful, as they’d left almost no traces behind. However, they had left indistinct footprints, and dirt on their shoes had been left on top of the concrete. The soil was rich in mineral, which differed from the dirt around the area. If anything, it seemed to come from a farm.

“It’s probably Fasta-san,” Koutarou suggested.

“I think so too. She must have come to take a look before the ambush.”

They had come to the same conclusion. Even in Forthorthe, there were relatively few female soldiers, and even fewer tall ones. In addition, there were probably only a handful of women with special forces skills.

Fasta had set up the device.

Yurika’s face stiffened. While she had been prepared for it, it wasn’t like it didn’t bother her.

“Yurika, if you’re worried about Fasta-san, you should be the one to protect her until the end,” said Koutarou.

“Protect Fasta-san?” Yurika’s eyes opened wide at his words. The idea had never even occurred to her. She had solely been thinking about fighting her.

“Yeah. I’m sure you can do it.”

This Yurika was different from who she had been before. Now, she was capable of protecting not only beetles, but Fasta too. Koutarou was convinced of that.

“Yes!” Yurika cried.

There was no need to fight. The idea of saving Fasta from her cruel fate suited her much better. Thanks to that, the hesitation on her face disappeared. Her expression was still stiff, but that was because it was full of conviction.

The court magicians served directly under the empress, and they were typically in the palace. Forthorthe still hadn't legally defined magic, so they were treated as an intelligence agency on paper and given special missions that normal intelligence agencies struggled to solve—meaning they handled incidents that were related to magic. As such, they were mostly forming counter-measures against the old Vandarion faction at the moment. One of their most important jobs was finding production facilities related to spiritual energy technology and magic.

“Everyone, we’ve gotten a request from the Blue Knight.”

Purple was the leader of the court magicians. She had been the leader for Darkness Rainbow, so the role naturally fell to her. Since she was older and calmer, the others had no objections.

“Is it a fight?!”

Crimson’s eyes sparkled at Purple’s report. She had been rolling around listlessly on a sofa with nothing to do, and she raised her body as she waited for Purple’s answer.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“All riiiiight!!!” Crimson pumped her fists with joy and jumped off the sofa. With quick steps, she tried to leave the workroom.

“Hold on, Crimson! Where are you going?!”

Green hurriedly stopped her from leaving. Purple still hadn’t told them any of the details. They didn’t even know who the enemy was.

“I’m going to prepare! You can listen to all the details, Green!”

It seemed that even Crimson wasn’t running off to sortie. She was going to prepare her new equipment and magic. As a result of everything she had learned in Forthorthe, she had grown far more powerful than before, and her

head was already full of thoughts about what to use.

With that, Crimson left with light steps.

“Crimson...” Green held her head as she looked at her leave and sighed heavily. She loved Crimson, but there were times when she couldn’t keep up with her.

That’s when Orange called out to her, “Crim-chan’s the same as always. With that kind of atmosphere, you’d think she was going on a date.”

The atmosphere around Crimson was as if she was a girl heading out for the night. And just like a girl would pick out clothes and accessories for her date, she was picking out staffs and ritual materials.



“Isn’t that what she’s doing, though? I think she’s viewing it as a date with the Blue Knight and Navy.”

Blue indifferently agreed with Orange. It was always hard to figure out what she was thinking, but her perception was excellent. Blue agreed that Crimson was thinking of it that way.

“That’s not true,” Green said with a slightly miffed expression. Whenever Crimson and Maki were brought up, she got upset.

“But I’m sure Crim-chan wants to show Navy-chan and Blue Knight-kun her new spells and new tactics,” said Orange. “I think she wants them to praise her.”

Just like Orange wanted to be called “cute,” Crimson wanted to be called “cool” or “strong.” Or at least that was how she saw it.

Green, of course, didn’t like that opinion either. She puffed up her cheeks and turned away, even though she suspected they were right and therefore couldn’t object.

“Everyone, you’re troubling Purple. Let’s get back on track and listen to what she has to say,” Yellow announced at the perfect moment, pulling everyone back to the topic at hand.

Orange and the others had said their piece, and Green was just barely not throwing a tantrum. That was the thoughtful and calm Yellow being considerate.

“Ah, sorries, Purp.”

“I’m sorry. Continue.”

Orange and Blue quickly apologized. At the same time, Green straightened her posture. Perhaps it was thanks to Yellow, but she was no longer in a bad mood.

“Thank you, Yellow,” Purple said.

“Not at all. So, what did the Blue Knight say?”

Purple had been smiling faintly, but Yellow urged her to continue, prompting

a more sober expression.

“He said a troublesome enemy might come and that the Grand Wizard, Grevanas, might show up.”

“Are you sure?” Green’s eyes lit up. As the resident information expert, she knew much about Grevanas. He was the founder of Folsaria and the rebellious wizard who appeared in the legend of Forthorthe. He was extremely dangerous, able to control dragons, and had attempted to use poison to ruin Forthorthe. If he was to make his move, it would be no laughing matter.

“Apparently, the chances of him showing up right away aren’t all that high,” Purple noted.

“Because their leader, Ralgwin, still hasn’t healed from his injuries, right?” Blue answered. “A magician of Grevanas’s level has no need to rescue him while he’s still injured.” Blue specialized in healing and summoning. Considering the risk of attacking while Ralgwin was injured, she felt it was best to delay a little.

“Blue is right. But the possibility is still high enough that it can’t be ignored,” Purple said.

Even if the risk was low, Grevanas was so dangerous that they couldn’t dismiss the possibility. There was only a one in ten chance of him appearing, but if casualties were a hundred times larger when he showed up, they would need to prepare for it.

“Maybe there’s an internal power struggle?” Yellow suggested. That was how she interpreted the non-zero chance.

Purple nodded at her words. “Yes. Like we once were, they don’t seem to be a monolith.”

In the past, Darkness Rainbow had been a hodgepodge of many anti-Folsaria organizations. They could never agree on anything and there had been constant internal conflicts. Even these girls, who were the leaders, had been the same, so they could easily imagine the state the old Vandarion faction was in.

“Of course that would happen after suddenly losing their leader,” Yellow remarked with a nod. And then she realized something. *Suddenly losing their leader, huh? I guess we’re not one to talk...*

There were six of them now, but there had been two more before: Elexis and Maya. They had been in leadership positions, guiding the girls. But they had gone missing in the decisive battle against Vandarion. The group had looked for them afterward, but they hadn't been found. Lately, Yellow has started to think the pair had died.

Purple continued, "Anyway, since there is a chance that Grevanas will appear, it's too much for just the Blue Knight and the others, and they've requested our aid."

"It's probably best that we don't tell Crim-chan anything about the Grand Wizard," said Orange.

"Yes, that would be for the best. If Crimson made preparations to beat him, the city would be destroyed," Blue agreed.

"We should prepare for the possibility that the Grand Wizard will show up... I'm going to go do that," Green answered.

With Elexis and Maya missing, the others were somewhat restless. Crimson was certainly not the only one; Purple, Orange, Blue, and Green shared her feelings. Their outlook wasn't meshing with the current situation. Having lost true allies for the first time had taken a bigger toll on them than expected, not to mention having completed their long-standing goal of returning to Forthorthe spurred on those feelings.

Maya, Elexis...if only you were here right now...

Yellow felt a vague anxiety that they would fall into grave danger. And now there was the Grand Wizard, Grevanas: an enemy more powerful than they had ever faced.

Perhaps the danger she feared had come. She didn't have any real basis for that belief, but Yellow feared it.

The Struggle For Ralgwin

Friday, November 11th

Ralgwin's transfer took place ten days after he woke up. His shoulder injury was serious, so the transfer was much sooner than it would have been on Earth, but medical technology was more advanced on Forthorthe, and he had already recovered enough to be moved, with the remaining treatment being carried out in the isolated facility. In other words, by Forthorthe standards, his life was no longer at risk—assuming he was properly cared for. Intense movement or unsanitary conditions could still be dangerous.

“If you are moving me now, the situation must be chaotic, Blue Knight.” Ralgwin wasn't able to move well because of his injury, but his mind was as sharp as ever. He knew he was being transferred the moment it was physically possible, so it was a fair assumption that they couldn't wait any longer.

Koutarou couldn't help but smile wryly at him. “Yeah. We want to move you while your subordinates are in disarray...although Fasta-san might come in their place.”

“Which is better than taking too long and trying to fight off Grevanas or the Gray Knight here at the hospital.”

“You're right. Not to mention, you might escape on your own once you recover enough.”

“That's true. You wouldn't be able to guess when I might make my move.”

There was a real risk of not only the old Vandarion faction or Fasta attacking, but also Ralgwin himself. The hospital was a place of healing—it wasn't made to keep its patients from escaping. So it was very likely that Ralgwin would make an escape attempt when his condition improved, although only he would know exactly when. He would balance the state of his injury and chance of escape and make his move when he thought it best. Koutarou and the others would have a hard time anticipating his timing.

“That’s why we’re moving you today.”

“I see you have a high opinion of me.”

“You should value yourself a little more, Ralgwin. To be honest, people like you are the most dangerous. If you had been a little dumber or hated by your allies, Grevanas and the Gray Knight would be the only ones we’d have to worry about.”

They were worried about when to transfer Ralgwin because they knew he was valuable enough that the old Vandarion faction would try to rescue him. The soldiers treasured his brains and compassion for them. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t cooperate even if Grevanas and the Gray Knight wanted to save him. That would make things simpler, as Koutarou’s group would only need to focus on countering magic and the powers of chaos, but because Ralgwin was held in such high regard, it was likely that normal soldiers would make up the bulk of the attacking force. They had information that backed that idea up: according to intel from the Imperial Army’s intelligence agency, the matter of saving Ralgwin had served as a linchpin to keep the old Vandarion faction from breaking apart.

“Maybe so,” Ralgwin replied. “By the way, Blue Knight, do you know the Gray Knight’s—” He was about to ask if Koutarou knew the Gray Knight’s identity, but reconsidered before the words escaped his mouth.

No, I owe him...

They might already be enemies, but he owed the Gray Knight for saving his subordinates, so he needed to repay him. With that in mind, he changed his question.

“Do you know the Gray Knight’s objective?”

That was another thing Ralgwin wondered about. He had sought an answer but never found out. All he knew was that bringing chaos to society was just a means to that end.

“I’ll tell you because it’s you, but...I don’t really know. All I can say is that he came from a different world and is trying to spread chaos while going after Sanae, who came from the same world.”

“So you don’t know much more than me.”

“Why ask?”

“Grevanas’s goal is clear. But despite working with the Gray Knight, I have no idea what his goal is. The matter was so unsettling, I figured maybe those opposing him would know.”

Grevanas wanted to resurrect Maxfern and finish what they had started two thousand years ago. He’d been consistent about that from the start. But he didn’t know what the Gray Knight was thinking. He was like a bomb, but the condition for detonation and the amount of explosives was unknown—that was how Ralgwin saw the Gray Knight.

“Sorry for not living up to your expectations. But I’ll find out in the coming battles,” Koutarou answered.

“If you do, let me know.”

“You mean you don’t intend to escape?” he asked out automatically. The only way Koutarou could share his findings with Ralgwin was if the latter was around to speak with him, which presumably meant that he wasn’t planning to disappear.

“This is special. Even if I escape, I want you to share that information,” Ralgwin explained.

“Fine, but that goes both ways.”

The Gray Knight was a mystery to both Koutarou and Ralgwin, and depending on his goal, it could mean trouble for both of them. As with natural disasters, they would share their information whether they were friend or foe.

“All right, I’ve got to go. Try to keep still until Fasta-san shows up.”

“Blue Knight...do you think she’ll come?”

“You know that better than anyone,” said Koutarou. “See you.”

With that, he walked away. He still had a lot to do, so he couldn’t stay around

and chat with all day. Moreover, speaking to Ralgwin was part of his job. He had come to check up on the prisoner and ensure there was nothing suspicious in the room.

After leaving, Koutarou headed for the hospital's top level, five floors up. He had business with his allies there.

"Sanae, what do you think?" he asked as he entered the room.

Sanae-chan, floating around as an astral projection, gave a start. She had been by Koutarou's side and read Ralgwin's aura. "It's okay. It didn't look like he was planning to do anything himself for now."

Ralgwin's aura was calm. If he'd been planning to escape, his aura would have been more active, so Sanae figured he would wait and see how things went.

"I think he's waiting for Fasta-san to make her move," the Sanae-san in the body said.

If Ralgwin acted on his own, it might throw a wrench in Fasta's plans. Since that could put her in danger, Sanae-san assumed Ralgwin was proceeding with caution so that he could cooperate with his ally.

"That's how much he trusts in Fasta. He knows she will come," Sanae-Oneechan added, clarifying what the three Sanaes had concluded.

"Then it's decided. Let's go ahead on the assumption that we'll be attacked," Koutarou agreed. Ralgwin wasn't despairing or giving up, so he must have been convinced that Fasta would come.

"Hmph, they better or our efforts will go to waste," Crimson, who was nearby, interjected. The court magicians had also shown up. Their job was to keep magic from being used around the hospital, since the biggest risk was that Grevanas would use the Teleport spell to whisk Ralgwin away. It wasn't the kind of spell one could use repeatedly, but as an undead, Grevanas could potentially use it twice in a row, which needed to be prevented.

"You didn't do anything, did you?" Green asked with a yawn next to Crimson. She was at the forefront of the Teleport countermeasures. One of the most troublesome aspects of using that spell was that it could lead to major accidents if there were obstacles at the destination.

For example, if the caster's arm overlapped with a tree, the overlapping parts could be blown away. The end result was something akin to a high-speed collision, so the standard procedure was to Teleport to an area you could see, or one that you knew very well. If neither was possible, information-type magic would need to be used to scout the area beforehand, so preventing that from being done would in turn prevent a teleport. As an expert in information-type magic, this job fell to Green.

"I'm guarding you guys," Crimson answered.

"You mean playing with the Blue Knight or eating candy with Navy?"

Compared to Green's frenzied work to counteract a Teleport, Crimson had done almost nothing. The energy-based magic that she specialized in was mostly offensive magic, so she wasn't very useful in situations like this. At best she could prepare for battle by sparring with Koutarou or talking about magic with Maki.

"It's not like some strong enemy's going to show up anyway, so playing around a little hardly matters."

"I'm amazed you can say that about Grevanas."

"What, Grevanas is coming?!" Crimson's eyes sparkled.

"Oops!" In contrast, Green's eyes clouded over. Up until now, they hadn't told Crimson that Grevanas might attack. They wanted to prevent Crimson from running wild, but due to Green's slipup, she finally knew.

"If that's the case you shoulda told me! I have things I have to do now!"

Crimson headed for a corner of the room with a spring in her step. She was in such high spirits, it was like everything beforehand had been a dream. In the corner was a lot of magic-related equipment that had been prepared for the battle. There were catalysts or bullets enchanted with magic, and also more taboo materials like a ruler's crown or a nihility converter. Crimson picked them up one at a time, closely inspecting them like a girl going on a date.

"Uh-oh..." Green held her head. This was the worst possible outcome.

"Koutarou, they have someone like Theia over there," Sanae-chan

announced.

“She’s even more extreme, though,” Koutarou replied.

“I’m willing to hold off on Grevanas if you fight me seriously, Blue Knight.” Crimson’s biggest point of discontent was that Koutarou wouldn’t fight her in earnest. She wanted to see how the man who had bested Grevanas—even if that was before Grevanas had become undead—would fight in a true battle. So if he fought her, she could give up on Grevanas.

“What are you going to do, Koutarou? The green girl’s looking over here and praying.” Sanae-chan was looking at Green, who was looking at Koutarou with her hands pressed together in prayer. In her mind, a fight against him, which would probably be a battle in anything but name, was better than an uncontrollable match with Grevanas.

“What are you talking about?! If we fight she’ll burn down the whole city!” Koutarou knew how dangerous a serious Crimson was. He’d fought and sparred with her several times, so he couldn’t readily agree to her request.

While he and Green were trapped in this awkward spot, a goddess appeared to rescue them.

“Calm down, Crimson.”

That goddess was Maki. She walked up to Crimson with a smile.

“Maki! But the Grand Magician is coming isn’t he?!” asked Crimson.

Maki was a friend of Crimson. She was currently acting like a sports player who was telling her friend about an opponent before a game. Maki faced Crimson and answered while still smiling.

“Crimson, there’s no guarantee that Grevanas will attack.”

“What? Then what are the chances?” The gleam in Crimson’s eyes faded a little. She had convinced herself that Grevanas’s attack was assured, so Maki’s words came as a surprise. It was like she’d been told that the competition was pulling out of the game.

“Maybe one in ten.”

That was their guess: he would appear at some point, but probably not now.

Still, even if the chances were low, the casualties resulting from a lack of preparation would be enormous.

“Come ooon...what a waste of my expectations...”

Crimson was disappointed. Staking her hopes on a one-in-ten chance wasn't worth it. Her shoulders dropped as she heaved a sigh, and she headed straight back to the sofa.

“That's why Green was keeping quiet about it. She didn't want you to get your hopes up,” Maki explained.

“Oh, I see.” Crimson slumped onto the sofa. Unlike moments before, she was now bored out of her mind. Her disappointment was only exacerbated by her high expectations. Maki slowly sat down next to her.

“Maki, can't you ask your man to fight me?”

“At what level?”

“The absolute max, where a blunder can get you killed.”

“That's... It'll depend on how this transfer works out. If you do well, I'll ask him.”

“Really?!”

“Really.”

“Meow.”

“All right!”

Thanks to Maki, Crimson was starting to return to her usual self. And Maki had only succeeded because she was Crimson's friend.

Green watched the two with an unhappy expression, but she didn't say anything in the end. Without Maki, things would have gotten a lot more complicated, and she was prudent enough to understand that.

Koutarou walked up to Green. “To get back on topic...I want to hear your prediction. When do you think the attack will happen?”

When he called out to her, Green's expression returned to normal. Crimson had flustered her, but she understood the situation. “Grevanas's attack? Or the

other?”

“Both.”

Since the plan to rescue Ralgwin was what kept the old Vandarion faction from breaking apart, Koutarou wanted information. That included speculations.

“Well...regarding Grevanas, I generally agree with what Navy said. My latest fortune tellings are fluctuating slightly, but they are at about the same odds.”

Maki’s predictions were in line with Green’s future forecast, and the chances of the old Vandarion faction attacking were low. For future forecasts, the clearer an image was, the more likely that future was. All of the images of an attack here were blurry, so Green figured Maki’s prediction of a ten-to-one chance was correct.

“I also think the odds of the hospital being struck are next to none,” she continued. “Even if they attack or use Teleport or some other magic, if they haven’t even begun examining this location by now, they won’t make it in time for the transfer.”

“I see...” Koutarou murmured.

“But since we are up against Grevanas, we can’t let our guard down. He might choose not to use magic right from the outset.”

Green remained ready. Knowing Grevanas, he had likely taken their defenses into account. He came from a time when magic had been used heavily in war and had built up experience and techniques from his time as a court magician, so it wouldn’t have been strange for him to exceed modern magicians in that regard.

“Then it’d be like being alert against a quick runner stealing a base rather than a normal runner...” Koutarou mused. “I suppose it’s not impossible that he’d attack strictly with normal forces.”

“There’s another one who might attack too, isn’t there? That might be why my future forecasts are blurry,” said Green.

Fasta made the fortune-telling process even more difficult. The future forecast was only stable as long as nothing was actually happening. Meaning it

was easy to know the enemy's first move, but if Fasta struck first, Koutarou's side and the old Vandarion faction would change their behavior in response, and the state of balance could crumble. That made it harder to read the future, leading to Green predicting a one-in-ten chance.

"In other words, it's not that there's a ten percent chance of an attack, but rather that a lot of dissimilar futures have been created?"

"That's right... Sorry for not being able to meet your expectations."

Green's shoulders drooped. Her conclusion was that she didn't know what Grevanas would do. The only certainty was that magic hadn't been used to investigate the hospital.

But their opponent was ingenious, and they had a second enemy on top of him. It would be cruel to demand more from Green, so Koutarou nodded to her.

"No, that's very helpful. What about our other attacker?"

"That one is clear. They won't hit the hospital."

"The chances are so low, you can outright declare that?"

"Yes. All possible futures show an attack with small numbers. So an attack on the hospital would only happen under extraordinary circumstances. like special weather, an accident, or if the old Vandarion faction made their move faster. In other words, they won't come unless something happens. They're very cautious."

If Fasta was to attack, a diversion would have to happen first. She was so careful that she wouldn't force the matter without one. She was likely worried about Ralgwin's injuries.

"That's why I don't believe there will be an attack on the hospital itself," said Koutarou, "but there are so many different potential attacks outside the hospital that your future forecast can't predict it accurately."

"Yes, you should be asking your devil for more details."

"Devil?"

"You're keeping one, aren't you? A devil that understands the future through magic better than future forecasting." Green was somewhat irritated. The

person she was calling a devil had defeated her future forecast, which she'd had absolute confidence in, so she didn't like her.

"Ah, you mean Kiriha-san."

Based on Green's tone, Koutarou could tell that she was talking about Kiriha. Back when they had still been Darkness Rainbow, Kiriha had defeated them by using their future forecast against them.

"Where did you even capture a monster like that?" Green asked in disgust. In her mind, Kiriha wasn't the type of person who needed to serve under someone else, so she was confused as to why the other was serving as Koutarou's unofficial adviser.

"She attacked me when I came home."

"Attack you?! That *thing* did?! I'm amazed you survived." Green shook in surprise, causing her glasses to slip, and as she fixed them, she looked at Koutarou with admiration.

"I think so too."

Koutarou and the girls had opposed each other at first. Kiriha had been the more peaceful of the girls, comparatively, but was still exceedingly dangerous. In the end, he'd found out that she was only pretending to fight to keep her relatives from going on a rampage, and upon discovering that, Koutarou was equal parts happy and relieved.

"All right, I should get back to my position. I'll leave this place to you, court magicians."

With the discussion coming to an end, he decided to take his leave.

As he turned around, Green looked at him and muttered, "How strange."

"What is?" Koutarou had been walking towards the door, but stopped when he heard Green.

"How strange...that we are still alive. We attacked not just that devil, but you too."

Like with Kiriha, Koutarou had opposed Darkness Rainbow in the past. And unlike Kiriha, they were directly hostile. Yet now they were fighting alongside

Koutarou. So Green realized that the court magicians were in an even stranger situation.

“I’m glad everyone made it out in one piece,” Koutarou said after thinking for a moment, then nodded. He felt that this was a far better outcome than continuing to fight against them.

“What is wrong with you! What do you think we were?! We were trying to kill you!” Green looked at Koutarou like she couldn’t believe him.

“It’s not like I have no feelings about it...” Naturally, Koutarou had an opinion on the matter. He was human, after all. But there was something more important that surpassed his opinion. Which was why Koutarou said nothing to the girls.

“Then why?!”

“Well, even then, you were Elexis’s friends, right?”

“Huh? Y-Yes...”

What was Elexis’s relationship to the court magicians? An ally? Yes. A business partner? No. Did they share an interest? Not that either. A comrade? Probably. Was it fun being together? Yes, it was. In that case, weren’t they friends? That was why Green hesitated and nodded.

“See...then I’m glad everyone made it out okay,” he concluded.

Koutarou had his fair share of complaints about Elexis. He was the man who’d tried to steal what was precious to Koutarou. But even Elexis had slowly changed over time. His original goal had been to take the throne, but in the end, he’d fought for Maya and the girls from Darkness Rainbow. He had continued to fight because they’d wished to return to Forthorthe. There were plenty of things about Elexis that he could be criticized for, but Koutarou had no intention of denying that one point.

“What are you doing, Koutarou? Hurry up!” Sanae called out.

“Sorry, I’m coming! See you later.”

Saying goodbye, he swiftly left. As expected, he was very busy.

“What a weird guy,” Green muttered as she stared at his back. It was like she

was looking at an enigma, but her eyes were somewhat gentle.

“Hmmm, I don’t get what boys are thinking about at all. He’s just like the young master.” Orange tilted her head. However, her expression was also bright.

“But I can understand why that Nana has taken such a fancy to him.” Blue was expressionless as always, but for her to even speak up showed that she saw him in a favorable light. Elexis was an important person to the girls.

“Is that true, Blue? Is Nana really...” Purple’s eyes opened wide at Blue’s revelation. She might have been the most mentally mature, but she was interested in her past nemesis. Blue nodded without saying a word.

“It seems to be true,” Orange answered, taking over the explanation. “The other day, she came to me to ask about an outfit for short people that doesn’t make her look like a child.”

After work the other day, Nana had come to Orange to ask for tips on fashion and makeup. Orange was the youngest of the court magicians, but she was the most well-versed on such topics.

“Talking about Earth’s fashion in this situation can only mean one thing.” Yellow, who was listening in close by, gently narrowed her eyes. Just as they were concerned about Elexis and Maya, there was nothing strange about Nana’s concern for Koutarou. Of course, in Nana’s case, her feelings were a little more involved.

“To think that aloof combat machine would... Still, I see now. It’s not that she’s an actual combat machine...” Crimson had begun to slowly realize this fact, so it didn’t feel strange to realize Nana wasn’t one either.

“It really sounds convincing when Crim-chan says it,” said Orange.

“Shut it. I’ve started to think lately,” Crimson answered.

“I know how you feel. I’ve started thinking lately too,” Yellow replied.

“Yes, that’s true,” Blue added.

Deep down, the girls were wishing to see Elexis and Maya once more.

Since they didn't know where the enemy would attack from, Koutarou and the others stationed Imperial Army soldiers at key positions while they remained on standby in Nefilforan's battleship Hidden Leaves, and other assault vessels were used to escort the transport. Their preparations weren't perfect, but it was the most optimal position from which to respond to most situations.

"Where would you attack, Kiriha-san?" Koutarou asked as he looked at a hologram showing the departure of the vehicles escorting Ralgwin. They circled the roundabout and drove out onto the road. Four-wheeled cars had been chosen for the job. They were heavily armored military vehicles and could even hover for a short period of time if necessary. Flying required paying attention to all directions, not to mention that craft capable of flight tended to be less armored. So they had chosen to travel by land out of consideration for Ralgwin's safety.

"Hmm, an intersection surrounded by buildings or tunnels would make for easy targets—typically, places where the fleet would struggle to provide support," Kiriha observed.

"There are more than one or two of those," Koutarou replied.

The distance to the isolated facility was twenty-something kilometers. The hospital was in the middle of Fornorn, while the facility was on the outskirts. They would normally prefer to use a transfer gate to move Ralgwin such a distance instantly, but in situations like these, an activated gate gave out gravitational waves that would serve as a signal for jammers. It was safe to assume that jammers had been set up around the hospital—using a transfer gate was difficult when both sides had time to prepare. So they had decided to use vehicles instead, although those came with their own weaknesses. Aircraft could be targeted from anywhere, and land-based vehicles had to run along the roads. There was plenty of time for an attack.

"That's why we have to do this," said Kiriha.

"Yeah, it'll be hard to attack five vehicles at the same time," Koutarou agreed.

That was why Kiriha had prepared four fake vehicles. All five would take different paths and head for the isolated facility. Only a handful of people knew which one Ralgwin was actually in, and that had only been decided moments

before departure. It was a simple plan, yet exceedingly effective.

“Things will change, but who will it impact the most?” Koutarou mused. The diversion would probably have the biggest influence on Fasta, since the old Vandarion faction had enough soldiers to cover all five locations.

“It’s impossible to perfectly prepare for all possible situations.”

“Jeez, what nuisance...” Theia wore a bitter expression. They would need to prevent enemy attacks from multiple locations and times. That was an extraordinarily troublesome situation. Their only saving grace was that the enemy was trying to save Ralgwin rather than assassinate him. Since his rescuers couldn’t attack too aggressively due to Ralgwin’s injuries, there would be less damage to the city.

Several minutes passed without a hitch. Since the distance to be traveled was over twenty kilometers through the city, it would take more than thirty minutes to complete the trip. There was a lot of traffic in the city, and cars couldn’t move at very high speeds. They would be traveling through the urban area for a while longer.

“Phew...” Kiriha, who had been staring at the holograms the whole time, let out a sigh.

Koutarou noticed that and called out to her. “What’s the matter, Kiriha-san?”

“We just passed the first danger zone.”

“Danger zone?”

“Indeed. Multiple vehicles passed through locations that made it easy to attack at the same time.” She smiled wryly. There was no regularity to the roads, signals, terrain, or buildings. They’d been built as necessary, so the convoy couldn’t avoid scenarios that were perfect for attack, such as multiple vehicles entering a tunnel at once. Of course, routes had been planned to avoid that as much as possible, but even so, hitting a few such locations was unavoidable.

“Well, that’s to be expected,” said Koutarou.

With just two or three vehicles, they could have avoided dangerous scenarios,

but it wasn't as easy with five of them. Trying to divert the enemy's attention with dummies worked against them in that regard. Still, this was an effective diversion, so it was still a plus in the end, no matter how vexing at times.

"I can only hope that nothing happens..." Kiriha murmured.

"That's unlikely. The old Vandarion faction is one thing, but Fasta has no choice but to attack at this time."

Once the transfer was complete, Fasta would have almost no chance of saving Ralgwin. While there were exceptions, like Sanae or Yurika, infiltrating a prison to break someone out like one saw in the movies was exceedingly difficult. Compared to that, a gamble during the transfer was more likely to succeed. That was why Fasta would come—at some point before the transfer concluded, without a doubt. Koutarou and the others were sure of that.

Fasta herself was struggling with the situation thanks to the measures that Kiriha had taken.

“Five cars... A plan made knowing that we are few in number.”

She was currently lurking in a room inside a building that lay between the hospital and isolated facility, analyzing the information that was coming in.

“Well, preparing against Grevanas would be difficult, so it makes sense for countermeasures to basically be taken against us...”

The old Vandarion faction had many forces, so it was difficult to know when they would attack. There was no guarantee they would even attack today. Meanwhile, Fasta had no choice but to attack now. So on top of the normal Imperial Army guard, the enemy was also using five cars as a diversion against her. With her few forces, it would be difficult to attack them all at once, but if she hesitated, everything would end, so it was a difficult situation.

“We’ll need to brace ourselves.”

Fasta was setting out today after numerous preparations. The fact that she was able to track all five cars was proof of her attention to detail. She knew where the hospital and isolated facility were, so she’d put up a surveillance net to cover any routes between them. She had set up monitoring devices, as well as small, unmanned stealth fighters stationed in the air. She had done all she could to prepare to attack. Fasta looked over from the monitor to the fist-sized device lying next to it. It was the remote controller for the preparations she’d made earlier.

I didn’t really want to use this...

She didn’t have enough forces, so doing what she could to make up for it was necessary. The device would make unmanned crafts and automated weapons attack on their own. Several of them had been set up along the possible routes. Yet she hesitated to use them—there was a chance that civilians could get caught up in the crossfire. She’d done what she could to keep that from happening, but it wasn’t perfect. Still, rescuing Ralgwin without those preparations would be even harder.

“And yet...”

Fasta's hand, reaching out for the remote control, stopped just before touching it.

"Fasta-san, try not to do anything bad if you can, okay?"

Shizuka's words resonated in her mind—the words she had spoken before they'd parted ways. And Fasta had answered in turn.

"I can't promise anything. After all, I will eventually have to instigate a prison break."

When she'd said that, Shizuka's eyes had teared up angrily. *"Dummy! That doesn't count as something bad!"*

Shizuka's warning had meant that she was fine with Fasta freeing Ralgwin but didn't want her to use evil means.

That's a difficult order, Shizuka...

Fasta had made up her mind when she'd left the old Vandarion faction, prepared to save Ralgwin no matter what it took. That was both her way to repay him and her obligation to her allies. Yet right now, her resolve was wavering.

At that moment, Fasta's computer gave an alert. "Target approaching point B13, C22, F08, H97. An attack is possible."

Hearing that, her gaze flew back to the holographic monitor. There, she saw monitoring devices following four cars in the middle of the transfer, and they were approaching the attack points that Fasta had anticipated. If she attacked, she would be able to tell which one Ralgwin was in based on how the soldiers reacted. Even if she checked four of the cars, there would only be one more he could be in. Once that was narrowed down, Fasta could join the attack too. Her experience as a soldier told her that she should proceed.

She picked up the remote control and opened her mouth to give the order.

"Attack..." But her instructions were incomplete.

"The order is unclear."

"We won't attack. Continue observing," she clarified.

“Understood. Continuing surveillance.” Fasta looked at the attack points being displayed on the monitor, as well as the people passing by. She hadn’t gone through with it because there were a few people around the attack points.

If they get caught up in this...

The image of Koutarou and the others grieving appeared in her mind. Because of that, she hesitated to put the plan into motion. Perhaps it was a sense of newly developed camaraderie.

Calm down. It’s okay. There are still more chances. This just makes sense for the plan. Even if we rescued him at that location, it would be difficult to bring him out of the city in all the chaos...

Fasta tried to soothe her panicking self. Personal feelings aside, the truth was that she’d lost her greatest chance. There would still be opportunities, but there was almost no chance that she would get another opening in which to attack four cars at once. And that meant Ralgwin would be in danger, so she couldn’t quite rid herself of the panic.

Beep. “Alert message. Detecting several warships approaching from above.”

“What?!”

“Heat source detected! Beware of a ground attack!”

“Grevanas, you bastard!”

As a result of her hesitation, Fasta had fallen behind. The old Vandarion faction had taken the initiative, and they paid no heed to casualties.

Fasta wasn’t the only impatient one—so was Grevanas. He had gained leadership of the old Vandarion faction, but that was only because they would be working towards breaking Ralgwin out. Naturally, many wanted a swift operation, and the rescue plan needed to be rushed. If not for that, the faction would fall apart. Grevanas would have preferred to wait until Ralgwin had healed, so he had obviously been pushed into a difficult situation.

“Grevanas-sama, four of the cars are in an easy-to-attack position!”

“Begin the assault on all five! We will reclaim Ralgwin no matter what!”

“Understood!”

The moment Grevanas had received the same information as Fasta, he'd ordered the attack. He didn't have the same hesitation she did.

"To all forces: all assault vessels and escort fighters are to sortie!" the captain ordered.

"We're cutting off the enemy's assistance. Bombard the ground if you would."

"But Grevanas-sama, bombarding a city goes against the galactic treaty!"

"Captain, do you not wish to save Ralgwin?!"

"Of course I do! But if we bombard the city, people will—"

"We've already pointed our blade at the empress! What does the galactic treaty matter now?!"

"I understand..."

Their first step was bombarding the city. By doing so as their forces approached, the Imperial Army wouldn't be able to get its reinforcement closer.

Of course, Forthorthe wouldn't allow for such an attack. It was forbidden by the rules of engagement that had been established long ago. While they were part of the old Vandarion faction now, the soldiers had once been part of the Imperial Army, so they were conflicted over Grevanas's orders. But in the end they obeyed. They needed to rescue Ralgwin, and it was true that they were already rebels.

"The assault ships are approaching the cars. Commencing attack!" cried the captain.

Four cars were currently in positions that were easy to attack, such as being stopped or inside of a tunnel. The fifth was driving down a normal road, yet Grevanas had ordered an attack on all of them.

"Now, what will you do, Blue Knight! Will you be able to protect them all like you did two thousand years ago?! Unlike in the past, the conditions are fifty-fifty now!"

The bombardment began, accompanying their strike. The white beam fired from Grevanas's ship lit up his undead and repulsive face.

When eight unidentified ships appeared above Fornorn, the bridge on Hidden Leaves was in an uproar. Since the odds were against the old Vandarion faction, the soldiers were caught off guard. Although Koutarou and the others weren't as shaken, they were still surprised.

All but one of them: Kiriha, who was sitting in the commander's seat.

"So, they really came! Emergency deployment of the distortion field! Don't let them bombard the surface!"

"Understood! Deploying the distortion field!"

When Kiriha gave her order, Ruth, in the operator seat, activated the five distortion field generators. The device was a high-powered field that was meant to block a space battleship's beam. The ships Grevanas and the others were using had been made for combat in the atmosphere, and they were far smaller and less powerful than those meant to fight in space. Moreover, the distortion field blocked the ground bombardment.

"Forces in the air, attack the three ships still flying! Don't let any shots slip through to hit the city!" Kiriha ordered.

"I'm going out too! Leave the surface to me!" Koutarou answered.

"Be careful, Koutarou. Grevanas is probably going all out this time."

"I know! I understand how he works, after all!"

Kiriha sent their air forces to deal with the three ships bombarding the ground from above. At the same time, the ground forces following Koutarou would head to Ralgwin. Grevanas was out to save Ralgwin. And it would likely be a fierce battle.

"Start jamming with gravitational waves! Cut off the enemy's pursuit!"

Next, Kiriha ordered them to bog down the enemy with gravitational waves, which space distortion navigation used, so it was unusable when disturbed.

"The gravitational wave jammer is activated! But it seems a space ship will warp out before the jamming can begin!" Ruth observed.

Unfortunately, the enemy had predicted as much, and a single battleship appeared above Fornorn before the jamming could fully activate.

“So, they timed their attack with their ship warping out... They can’t be taken lightly.” Kiriha focused once more. The enemy was attacking at the same time as their battleship was warping out, so the jamming wouldn’t make it in time. It seemed to be an ingenious plan at first glance, but it also meant they couldn’t back down in the event of any irregularities.

A warp couldn’t be reversed, which indicated that the enemy had unyielding resolve. They would take back Ralgwin no matter the cost. Based on that, she assumed they were dealing with Grevanas. He had the motive to go that far, and the resolve, but in a bad way. A battleship was being brought in over the capital, which they were trying to bombard. He was a Grand Wizard with a lot of experience, and if Kiriha let her guard down for even a moment, the tables could easily be turned. The utmost caution was demanded.

“Still, I am impressed that you were able to predict when Grevanas would attack,” Theia said before jumping into one of the ship’s gunner seats. She had remained on Hidden Leaves to fight the battleship that had appeared. The ship’s firepower was necessary to protect the forces on the ground and prevent Fornorn from being damaged.

“Rather than predicting he would attack at this time, it’s more like this timing invited an attack,” Kiriha responded.

Most of the region between the hospital and the isolated facility was urban, and while there was some variation, people were generally everywhere. To keep casualties to a minimum, it was best to invite an attack when their defense was solid, so this location had been chosen for such a plan.

“What do you mean?”

“I created an opening on purpose so that they would attack here. Based on the routes chosen, this is where four of the cars are easiest to attack.”

Merely wanting Grevanas to attack a certain point at a certain time wasn’t enough. They needed to create a situation where it was easy for him to do so. That was why Kiriha had planned a moment when several cars in transit were defenseless. Since the routes had been a secret until the day of the transfer, Grevanas’s people could only have found out about it at the moment the cars took off. Not to mention the capital was big. So even if the Imperial Army

carried in defensive equipment, and citizens were evacuated on the pretext of unexploded ordinances, Grevanas's side only had a brief window to notice the trap.

"Creating an opening for all five cars would have been suspicious, though, so I kept it to four. And even then, Grevanas has enough fighters to force an attack on all five cars, so I figured it would be easier to deceive him."

Just to be sure, Kiriha had avoided leaving all five cars defenseless at once. Going that far might have tipped off the enemy. Just as she'd hoped, Grevanas had made his move due to his lack of knowledge of modern warfare. If Ralgwin had been with him, it would not have happened. Of course, the attack had been rushed to save the very man in question.

Kiriha, having calmly analyzed the situation, had won on a strategical level.

"I-I'm glad you're on our side..." Theia's jaw dropped, and Koutarou, who had listened in over the comms, felt the same way.

"By the way, Green called Kiriha-san a devil a little while ago...and it's not like I can't understand how she feels..." Koutarou chimed in.

"How rude. Here I am, devoting myself to you."

"Even if you're an angel to us, you're a devil to the enemy."

Kiriha loved Koutarou and the others, and she poured her love into them every day, without end. But because of that, she was very harsh on those who stood against them. She didn't try to kick the enemy while they were down, but she would create an overwhelming difference and crush them every time. With that in mind, she was nothing other than a devil to the old Vandarion faction. A frightening devil who could see right through them without ever showing herself.

"But we were still on thin ice. It would have been fine if Grevanas had chosen not to attack, but he could have also rushed the assault before the openings I planned. Frankly, I was hardly able to breathe until now."

If a battle broke out elsewhere, it was likely that many would die. After the cars had departed, there had been a moment when three of them were open for attack, which had been really draining on Kiriha. It was fortunate that

Grevanas had chosen to make his move now.

“It looks like I owe you. But you can just kick back and relax, because now it’s my turn!” Theia said with a grin. She’d felt the same way as Kiriha, and now that the time for payback had come, she sprang into action.

“Theia, getting motivated is great, but don’t drop a battleship on the city,” Koutarou advised her.

“I know that! You should trust in your master!”

“As you wish, My Princess.”

“Then here I come!”

And just like that, she opened the gun port and opened fire with beams and lasers, targeting the enemy battleship. Her first goal was to strain their distortion field. That way, they wouldn’t be able to put more energy into attacking, limiting their means of an offense.

As Theia began her bombardment, Koutarou and the others landed on the ground. Their goal was to protect Ralgwin, and they had devoted a lot of personnel to protect the car he was in. The others only needed to stall, so soldiers from Nefilforan’s unit were doing what they could. The outcome would be decided if they could protect Ralgwin here or not.

“Blue Knight, your arrival means that Ralgwin is here, as expected.”

Standing before Koutarou was Grevanas. The car that Ralgwin was in had stopped at an intersection. Around it were soldiers, protecting it. Koutarou’s group had shown up just as Grevanas was about to leap into action.

“You don’t have to play stupid, Grevanas. You’re here because you knew. You’re not the type to show up based on intuition.”

“Oh, I am not playing stupid. Your showing up means that I am now convinced. Frankly, I am relieved.”

When Grevanas’s forces had attacked all five locations, only the soldiers around this car had behaved differently. At the other locations, they had prioritized supporting their allies over the car, and only the soldiers here were focusing on protecting the car itself. On top of that, this car had more guards

than the others, which was why Grevanas had pursued it.

“Relieved, huh? This is certainly a rough attack for you.”

Grevanas’s style of fighting didn’t allow for words like “relief” or “unease.” In that sense, this approach wasn’t like him.

At Koutarou’s remark, his unsightly face twisted into a smile. “In order to keep the faction from breaking apart, I had no choice. Ralgwin’s leadership is necessary to hold the organization together.”

“So...attack by force or fall apart... Maxfern would have found another way.”

“I do not have Maxfern-sama’s charisma, so this was the only option.”

As it turned out, Kiriha had read the situation perfectly—but that came with its own problems.

“Then you won’t back down even if I ask.”

“That is true, both for Maxfern-sama’s sake and to keep the organization together.”

Grevanas couldn’t back down for multiple reasons. Without Ralgwin, the resurrection of Maxfern would turn into a distant dream. Moreover, the old Vandarion faction couldn’t be maintained without Ralgwin. In other words, a second rescue attempt was impossible, which had forced them into this situation where they had no choice but to win.

“We have our own reasons for not handing him over...so it’s come down to this.”

Tsching.

Koutarou drew the silver sword at his waist and pointed the tip towards Grevanas.

Although not unexpected, that sword is a problem...especially for this body...

Grevanas’ eyes narrowed slightly as he saw Signaltin’s blade. His body was a walking corpse that moved on necromantic magic. It was far more advanced than spells that created zombies, but it was magic all the same, so a sword that could disperse magic like Signaltin was his natural bane. He needed to be

exceptionally cautious around it.

“I am not particularly fond of violence...but I suppose there’s no other choice.”

Grevanas showed no fear despite his thoughts, and readied himself with a thin smile.

As expected, it’s hard to read his presence... He’s a difficult foe. Koutarou was equally cautious of Grevanas. Like with zombies or skeletons, corpses that moved on magic had practically no spiritual energy running through them, making it very difficult for his Spirit Vision to read their intentions. That applied to Grevanas as well, and Koutarou couldn’t get a read on his next action or goal. He was the second most troublesome opponent after someone who had completely mastered the control of spiritual energy, like Sanae.

“Let’s go, squad leader Sansara! Don’t let the enemy near Grevanas-sama!”

What made Grevanas harder to fight was the squad of soldiers that he’d brought with him, led by a female captain. They stood between Koutarou and Grevanas, forming a wall. Meaning that Koutarou couldn’t cut him down without breaking through their formation.

I guess he won’t expose his weakness that easily...

Koutarou clicked his tongue in his mind. Signaltin might be able to disperse Grevanas's body, but not the soldiers. If they worked together to oppose him, they would be exceedingly difficult to manage. Yurika and Nefilforan's unit had already proven that the combination of magic and modern warfare was powerful.

That was when Nefilforan walked up to Koutarou's side.

"Lord Veltlion, if they are going to fight, then so should we." She readied her greatspear. As she was wielding a large weapon, her stance, too, was large. It was a powerful pose that overwhelmed the enemy. Nefilforan had missed her chance during the civil war, so she was excited about the opportunity to become the Blue Knight's first spear.

"Commander, your face is scarier than usual; calm down a little," Nana called out to her, noticing that she was being a little too hasty. Despite her youthful appearance, Nana had much more experience in combat than Nefilforan and was currently observing the battlefield vigilantly.

"I'm sorry, vice commander. But we royals have no choice but to fight Grevanas," Nefilforan announced.

"If you're going into this fight with such determination, we're going to help. Did you get that, everyone?" Nana followed up.

Fortunately, Nefilforan managed to restrain herself a little thanks to Nana's words. Sensing that, Nana spurred the others on, and the soldiers roared in response.

"Raaaaahhhh!!!"

If Nefilforan was the first spear of the Blue Knight, then they would become the shield that allowed that spear to be wielded freely, especially when the enemy was a legendary magician. Their morale was sky high at the prospect of being the Blue Knight and princess's shield as they fought a villain attempting a coup.

"Hehehe, we can't be outdone either, Maki," Crimson chuckled.

"I wouldn't mind being outdone by them," Maki replied.

Nefilforan's unit wasn't the only one protecting Koutarou. Crimson and Maki had been chosen from the magicians to help as well. This was originally meant to be Yurika's and Maki's roles, but taking suitability into account, Yurika and Crimson had swapped places. Yurika was currently with the rest of the court magicians, providing support from the back.



“Get serious, you hear me! You’ve got to protect your man, right?!” Crimson was elevated. It was her first serious fight in a while, and she was up against a legendary Grand Wizard.

In contrast, Maki was calm. “That has nothing to do with getting serious. It’s a prerequisite.”

“Look at that face... You’re the most motivated one here...” Crimson muttered.

Maki was always prepared to throw away her life for Koutarou’s sake if it ever came down to it, so she wasn’t exactly brimming with enthusiasm. However, she believed that it was her job to eliminate Koutarou’s enemies until that time came. She wouldn’t allow those who meant him harm to exist. In that sense, she had plenty of motivation, making her a highly dangerous enemy who couldn’t allow Grevanas to live.

I cannot be holding back here at all. Do not be timid, Grevanas; if you do not win here, the second coming of Maxfern-sama will not happen!

Grevanas also had a fiercely determined look on his dried-out face. He knew that everything was on the line with this battle. So, with more resolve than he’d ever had before, he firmly held his staff in both hands.

Koutarou and the others would have loved to have devoted all of their fighting power to protect Ralgwin, but Harumi, Shizuka, Clan, and Sanae-chan were each in command of their own troops, guarding the other four cars just in case. Maki was doing the same, but Ralgwin was inside her car, so she was working under Koutarou for now. The other four were busy intercepting the old Vandarion faction forces that were attacking the vehicles. They knew it would mean trouble if those forces joined Grevanas, so they needed to stall them if nothing else.

“It looks like things have started over in Satomi-kun’s area too,” Harumi observed. She was the first to notice. She had a strong connection to Signaltin, so she had felt it the moment Koutarou had drawn his sword.

Against Grevanas, small tricks will be pointless. They may even get in the way. It would be better to focus on the maximum output of mana and increasing the reaction speed on impacts...

Harumi could control Signaltin, even when they were apart, and she adjusted the sword's abilities to make it easier for Koutarou to fight. Normally, she maintained an upper limit on the mana output based on how strong the enemy was, adjusting it in real time depending on the situation. But that wouldn't work against Grevanas. If she didn't have the sword's full power unleashed on impact, it might not be enough to break through his magical defenses. So she set it to just use raw power and left Maki and Nana to cover for anything else that might be needed. Harumi felt that was the best move, considering their opponent.

"It's going to be harder to use than normal, but do your best, Satomi-kun!" she called through Signaltin.

"*Thank you!*" Koutarou's reply was grateful. He had the same opinion as her: the primary focus should be on the sword's penetrative power. As for how to hit their enemy in the first place, he'd have to figure that out later.

"As you can see, we are the keystone in this battle! Don't you dare fall back!" the vice-captain cried.

"Yeaaaaahhhh!!!" roared the soldiers.

"Huh?" After speaking with Koutarou, Harumi noticed that the soldiers around her were extremely motivated. "U-Uhm? What is..."

She was perplexed, not sure where the sudden surge of morale was coming from. The one to enlighten her was the vice-captain, who was as excited as the rest.

"Just looking at you, we can understand what is happening—and how important it is to protect you, Harumi-sama. It is an honor, Captain Harumi."

The vice-captain saluted as he stared at Harumi's hair. It had started glowing silver a little while ago, and any Forthorthian would know what silver hair meant on an ally of Koutarou. Harumi's connection to the legendary princess aside, she had essentially taken over the role. Her location was also important.

She was definitely needed in this fight, but since she could control Signaltin, she was someone Grevanas would focus on first. That was why she had been placed here, fighting a detached force instead. And it meant a lot to the soldiers to be given the duty of protecting her. They were practically serving a legend.

“I’m just an average citizen,” she protested.

“Your birth is not of any concern. What matters is what you are doing right now.”

“Then let us do what must be done! Let us wipe out the enemy before us and head to Layous-sama’s aid,” Harumi instructed with a stiff expression as she gathered her mana and focus into her hands. The vice-captain was right—at the moment, she needed to help Koutarou win.

“You heard her, everyone! Fight without fear! But don’t get reckless! We need to preserve our forces and move around to back up His Excellency!”

“Understood!”

Harumi’s squad was strong. They had a clear banner in her to rally around and a clear goal in mind. They faced the enemy with dauntless courage and demonstrated perfect cooperation. Harumi was supporting them with her magic. Among the four squads led by the girls, this was likely the strongest. Their approach to combat was the most certain.

If Harumi’s squad was the strongest, then the squad with the highest attack power was Shizuka’s. Her strength stood out among the rest as she dove into the enemy lines and wrenched open their positions. With the standard equipment that the old Vandarion faction soldiers were using, they had no way of stopping this very simple strategy, and they were in danger of falling apart right from the outset.

“Is that girl a monster?! She doesn’t even have a knife!”

The captain of the old Vandarion faction squad was in a panic. And why wouldn’t he be? An unarmed girl was relentlessly mowing down his forces. The soldiers were equally panicked and were being picked off by the normal soldiers behind her. If they could take down the girl in question, the formation would easily be broken, but it wasn’t that simple. Even after shooting her directly in

the head with an anti-tank rifle, she just rubbed her forehead like it hurt a little and continued coming at them. And that only further spread panic. It was like the soldiers were inside of a horror film.

“Hm, uncle, could you breathe some fire?”

“How hot do you want it?”

“The weakest you can manage, please.”

“Understood.”

Fwoosh.

The soldiers reached their peak panic when the girl spat out fire from her mouth. It was flashy, but all it did was block their view for a moment and set fire to the objects around them that burned easily. That was not how the soldiers who were hit saw it, though. They had seen Shizuka’s power firsthand and assumed that being hit would kill them. Seeing their allies hit running around with burning clothes, the rest started to run away all at once. It was a weak fire that would go out if they had only dropped and rolled, but they didn’t have the composure to calmly think it through.

“I see... You wanted to create this flow.”

The projection of Alunaya that was sitting on Shizuka’s shoulder bared his fangs in a grin. He understood why she hadn’t wanted the full firepower.

“I tried doing something Kiriha-san might do.”

“That’s the proper way of using such power. Well done, Shizuka.”

“It’s an honor to hear that from you, uncle.”

Seeing their comrades run made the other soldiers want to flee, so even a small fire was enough to accomplish that. It wasn’t like Shizuka wanted to kill them.

Some of Fasta-san’s friends might be here...

She was relieved that it had worked out. The enemy scattered before her, and she gracefully walked down the path they had made.

“Everyone, please don’t shoot the people running,” she ordered.

“Understood!”

The soldiers under Shizuka’s command calmly defeated the remnants of the soldiers who were still coming at them. It was safe to say that Shizuka’s squad had more or less completed their mission. While the old Vandarion faction soldiers hadn’t suffered many losses, they had completely lost their will to fight. There was no chance they would go to reinforce Grevanas.

“What an infuriating man.” That was when Alunaya’s expression twisted in displeasure.

“What’s wrong, uncle?”

“The enemy is coming. It seems Grevanas has taken countermeasures against us.”

Thump, thump.

The ground shook as Grevanas’s countermeasure appeared. Considering they could feel the shaking while standing on a paved road, it must have had considerable mass.

“Uncle, is that a living creature? Or a machine?”

“I don’t know any better than you.”

Thump.

Appearing before Shizuka and Alunaya was a giant, standing over twenty meters tall and wielding a massive hammer. Its appearance was bizarre. Its complexion was pale, the skin taking on a blue tinge, and metallic machinery had been inserted into its body here and there. The machinery was also turned on, glowing red or green in places.

“It is clear that this is no simple enemy.”

“Right,” Shizuka agreed with a nod, clenching her fists. Her expression was sharper than ever. She was angry. *He just used these soldiers as sacrificial pawns...*

Grevanas had prepared a countermeasure for Shizuka, or more specifically, Alunaya. But he couldn’t have known where Shizuka would appear, which was why the giant had been kept on standby while he allowed the normal soldiers

to attack. After confirming Shizuka's location, he sent in his trump card. That might have been the right choice from a strategic point of view, but it ended up enraging Shizuka, who cared about Fasta's feelings.

Meanwhile, Clan was leading the soldiers that Theia was originally supposed to handle. But since Theia needed to help with enemies in the air, Clan had been placed in charge of the soldiers this time.

"Sorry for not being able to reach you," Clan apologized.

"It was so sudden, it can't be helped. Not to mention that in Your Highnesses' case, you can use your powers better from where you are than over here. We will leave the control of the unmanned craft to you," the vice-captain replied.

"I understand! Use my unmanned craft as shields!"

If Shizuka's selling point was attack power, Clan's was defensive power. She was controlling many unmanned fighters from the rear and supporting the entire squad. Remote control like this was her specialty, and her controlling the fighters made them far more effective than if a normal person were to try.

"Cradle, change the main preset to anti-personnel and the auxiliary to anti-mobile weapons," she ordered.

"Understood," answered the AI. "Changing the preset of the unmanned crafts. The main is now anti-personnel with auxiliary anti-mobile weapons."

"I'm changing the positioning. Give me manual control. And after repositioning, try to maintain that formation."

"As you wish, my princess."

Clan sent the heavily armored fighters forward to serve as the soldiers' shields. She also had the lightweight and maneuverable craft cover the soldiers' blindspots as she searched the perimeter. That allowed for the deployment of swift soldiers with heavy defenses, making up for the commander not being on the scene.

I'd expect nothing less of Princess Clariossa, the vice-commander thought. She may be young, but she didn't stand on the battlefield with His Excellency the

Blue Knight for nothing... Clan hadn't had a military upbringing like Nefilforan, but her tactics were apt and she understood how to best support the soldiers' advance. So the experienced vice-captain had no need to interject.

"Pardomshiha, is Veltlion using Warlord?" Clan asked.

"No, he said that it would only make him a bigger target for Grevanas, so he left it behind."

"Then send it out. I will use it over here."

"Not to Master?"

"No, over here, please. That's what the Orange Line is for."

"I understand. Sending Warlord III Rev through the Orange Line."

The finishing touch was Warlord III Rev. *Fwoosh*. It descended from Hidden Leaves above, using its boosters to decelerate and landing so as to protect the advancing soldiers. The machine was normally used to make up for Koutarou's weakness in large-scale battles, but he wasn't aboard at the moment.

Despite that, it was moving on its own as if Koutarou was controlling it. That was made possible by the Orange Line backpack it was equipped with, inside of which was an AI and various equipment to stand in for Koutarou. In other words, the backpack allowed Warlord III Rev to fight like an unmanned craft. Naturally, it didn't perform as well without Koutarou in it, but when it came to cooperating with its surroundings, it performed better than normal. As long as no particularly strong enemies showed up, it would be fine. On top of that, it had a special quality aside from its performance.

"It's the Blue Knight! The Blue Knight is here!"

"Retreat! Enhance the distortion field!"

"Hang on, the Blue Knight should be fighting over at—"

"Now's not the time for that! He is right in front of us!"

The enemy mistook the AI for Koutarou himself. Facing the Blue Knight would drain the morale of any Forthorthian, and the old Vandarion faction, which had split up to cover a wide area, retreated to a single location, fearing that Koutarou would take down each group individually.

“I will leave the rest to you, vice-captain,” Clan said.

“Indeed. This level of support is more than enough.”

It made sense for the enemy to gather in one location when facing a Warlord III Rev with Koutarou on board. While some of them were being attacked, the rest could focus their firepower to defeat him. But as a general rule, forcing the enemy to gather in a single location made them very easy to fight. After all, they could be surrounded.

This is... I see Princess Theia isn't Princess Nefilforan's only rival. If she is careless, Princess Clan will overtake her, the vice-captain mused.

Clan made full use of Koutarou's influence to change the conditions of the battlefield. The vice-captain wanted Nefilforan to take the throne, but even he was amazed by Clan's work. Harumi had leadership, Shizuka had firepower, Clan had steel defenses—each of the squads guarding the cars had their own specialties. And that naturally applied to Sanae's group as well, although nobody had any idea what was going on.

“Next is over here!” Sanae called.

“Wh-What? Enemy soldiers suddenly started gushing forth! What is going on?!” cried a soldier.

Sanae was a psychic, but she wasn't using her powers to directly attack. She was using them to keep casualties to a minimum, both for allies and enemies.

Fasta would cry if any soldiers died...

In Sanae's mind, Fasta was no longer an enemy, which was why she didn't want any of Fasta's allies to get hurt. But at the same time, she couldn't put her own allies in danger. So Sanae had come to the conclusion that she could use her psychic powers to control the entire battlefield.

“Sanae-chan, it feels like enemies are coming from the right,” Sanae-san warned her as she astral projected, observing the enemy from above. Even if they tried to hide, they couldn't escape her Spirit Vision. All of the enemies in this area were under her surveillance.

“All right, everyone, they're coming from here! Get around them!” Sanae-

chan said, passing the information on to her allies. Her approach was to gather the opinions of the entire squad to decide on her actions. She especially focused on the voices of the veteran soldiers, like the captain and vice-captain.

The Sanae-chans had a few concerns about her strategic intelligence, so their advice was very welcome. It took a lot of spiritual energy to constantly gather information on friend and foe, and that was Sanae-chan's job.

"Here we go! Special Attack, Sanae-chan Solar Flare!" called Sanae-Oneechan.
Flash.

"Whoa, wh-whaat?!"

Sanae-Oneechan was in charge of confusing the enemy on the battlefield. She followed the policies laid down by the soldiers and caused supernatural phenomena. As a prankster, that kind of job fit her perfectly. She also liked the fact that stirring things up kept any proper battles from happening. There would be a firefight from time to time, but nobody had been killed so far.

"Nyahahaha! Let's keep them coming! Special Attack Sanae-chan Snow Festival!"

"I'm worried..." said Sanae-san.

"Everything's working out so far! Don't worry! It'll probably be okay!" Sanae-chan replied.

"'Probably'? Uh-huh, I'm worried..."

The Sanaes were cooperating with the Imperial Army and were perfectly shutting down the old Vandarion faction, who were searching for the enemy soldiers but struggling to find them, instead being attacked by one bizarre phenomenon after another. And even when they did find their targets, they ended up being suppressed and forced to retreat. They were in a state of panic, with no idea what was happening.

The Sanaes were only able to do this because the scale of the battle was small enough. If the battle had been larger, it would've been impossible to manage. So they were lucky that there were no deaths.

The progress of the fight was being reported to Grevanas. The conditions differed, but all four locations were at a disadvantage.

Although this is what I expected, each front is collapsing too fast...

During the first strike, they hadn't known which car Ralgwin was in, so a small squad had been sent to each car. The guards' reactions had helped to pinpoint Ralgwin's location, and Grevanas had sent the main forces there. Since their goal was to rescue Ralgwin, those main forces were more powerful, so he had expected that his troops at the other four locations would be at a disadvantage. The surprising part was that those four locations had wrapped up faster than he'd thought thanks to Kiriha predicting his moves and stationing enough resistance at each point to deal with them.

"The difference in skill is showing, Grevanas!" Koutarou said, having received the same information. In this situation, they needed to avoid rushing an attack and creating an opening. Instead, Koutarou had the soldiers under his command prioritize defending the vehicle that Ralgwin was in, calmly beating back the enemy.

"Indeed, you lacked a strategist of this caliber two thousand years ago." Even Grevanas had to acknowledge Kiriha's smarts. Koutarou might have had someone with the same level of smarts—Maxfern's niece, Lidith, was highly intelligent—but not even she had had a full grasp of the technology that Koutarou and Clan had at their disposal. That was a natural outcome, as Koutarou and Clan had kept the information concealed to avoid changing the future. So there was an absolute wall between Lidith and Kiriha that the former could never overcome.

Ralgwin's absence is also playing a part in this... Grevanas is still not used to the present age... Koutarou thought.

Grevanas might not acknowledge it, but not having Ralgwin to advise him on the state of modern Forthorthe was having an impact, at least as far as Koutarou could tell.

Could the Gray Knight not have fulfilled that role, hmm? That question entered Koutarou's mind for a moment. The Gray Knight was probably from Forthorthe as well, so surely he could have taken Ralgwin's place, but that

hadn't happened. It was a mystery, but Koutarou pushed it into a corner of his mind. It probably just meant that the Gray Knight wasn't a skilled strategist, and it wasn't something worth distracting himself with in the middle of a battle.

"Not to mention, I'm here now!" Crimson cried. "Ray of Sunshine—Modifier—Single Wave Length—and... Gaze Tracking!"

Crimson finished her incantation and her eyes started glowing red. A beam of red light was fired out of each eye: lasers that she had created through magic. Strictly speaking, they hadn't shot from her eyes, but rather a tiny bit in front of them. Since they were guided by her gaze, however, that was how it looked.

"Urgh!" The two lights struck Grevanas, but they weren't enough to fry his dried-out body. He only suffered a few wounds and a tear to the robe he was wearing.

"There's more where that came from!" Crimson called out. The laser was following her sight, and she moved to stare at Grevanas's body.

"Release the delay; close the mist of the midnight sun!" said Grevanas.

Pshh. A white mist wrapped around his body. The laser was greatly dispersed and left only minor burns on its target.

"That was dangerous. If I had been struck by that just after I resurrected, it would have spelled the end for me," he remarked.

Lasers hadn't existed two thousand years ago, but Grevanas already knew that such weapons existed and had come up with his own countermeasures.

"Not bad; that's what I'd expect from a legendary Grand Wizard!" Crimson replied.

Her laser had been blocked, but she seemed to be enjoying herself. Fighting was everything to her, and a powerful enemy was exactly what she wanted.

"Dagbaran, push up the front with your monstrous strength!" ordered Sansara. "Aside from the Blue Knight, most appear to be weak!"

"Understood, squad leader!"

Grevanas had made a number of preparations. Predicting that the Imperial Army would bring magicians of their own, he chose soldiers with great strength

to make up the frontline. Magicians tended to be weak in close combat, and due to Folsaria's culture and society, the majority tended to be women. So closing in and locking them into a melee to prevent them from using magic was a standard anti-magician tactic. Maki and Crimson were relatively strong in close combat, but that was only in battles between magicians. It was clear that it was more advantageous for Grevanas to support expert soldiers with magic.

“Graaaaahhh!!!” roared the soldiers.

“You’re not going anywhere!” Koutarou yelled. He and the others knew the tactic Grevanas was trying for, so he and the soldiers with him barred their path.

Koutarou was up against a particularly well-built soldier. His large body was wrapped in heavy armor, and the gunfire brought against him didn’t even make him budge as he made a beeline for Crimson.

Shing. Koutarou’s Signaltin clashed with the soldier’s beam sword. A normal blade would have broken, and a magic sword would have dispersed. But this one was different. While the beam that made up the blade had been destroyed in the clash, it quickly reformed due to the structure being designed to gush out white-hot heavy metal particles. Grevanas had been correct in assuming that a sword which didn’t use magic and had no solid form would be effective against Signaltin.

“I can do it! I can fight, Grevanas-sama!” cried Dagbaran.

“Keep it up a little more, Dagbaran-kun. As long as you can hold back the Blue Knight—”

“It won’t be that easy while I’m here!” came Nana’s voice.

Bang, bang bang! In that moment, a small figure leaped out from behind Koutarou and shot at Dagbaran, whom Koutarou was fighting. The bullets easily pierced his armor—these were no normal bullets.

“Dagbaran!” Sansara, the squad leader giving out commands from the rear, screamed at the sight. The bullets had gone through Dagbaran’s left arm.

“Calm down, squad leader; my left arm is a prosthetic!” However, Dagbaran was fine. He had been revived by Grevanas the other day and his left arm had been reformed. It moved as he wished and looked real, but it was artificial. So as long as it could move, there was no need to panic.

“R-Right,” Sansara stuttered.

“Still, Grevanas-sama, the distortion field is not working against her bullets!”

“It just means you can’t let your guard down! Let me try this!” Grevanas replied.

A purple light covered their bodies. It was a defensive spell that protected one from spiritual energy. Armor enhanced with this spell should block even bullets that contained spiritual energy.

“This opponent is such a pain! He knows how to hit us where it hurts!”

Bang! Bang! Bang! The small figure that had shot at Dagbaran—Nana—tried shooting at the enemy soldiers and landed next to Koutarou. While her bullets struck true, the purple light blocked them and prevented any damage to the soldiers. If they were pushed into a battle of raw strength, Koutarou and those who were more reliant on special abilities would be at a disadvantage.

“In other words, this is why you were strong,” Grevanas mused. “All that’s left is to overcome your qualities and we can win.”

“You sure showed me,” Nana retorted. “One should never give up on the journey to becoming stronger.”

Koutarou’s and the others’ strength lay in using a mix of science, magic, and spiritual energy to hit their opponents where it hurt. At the moment, Grevanas could do the same. He had excellent subordinates as well. Grevanas outclassed Koutarou’s group in terms of magic, and the soldiers outclassed them when it came to physical strength. As Grevanas had said, it was very likely that Koutarou’s side would lose.

“Not to mention I can do what you can’t!”

Fwish.

Grevanas held his staff up high and a dark figure appeared from the

shadows. They looked human, but their bodies had rotted away, and some were merely bones.

The moment he saw them, Koutarou's face twisted in anger. "Did you raid a graveyard before coming here?!"

"What an undeserved accusation! They crawled out of their graves on their own and offered their cooperation."

These rotten figures were undead that Grevanas had created using magic. Zombies and skeletons. They had all been born through magic, without relying on waste, so their physical abilities were weaker, but they followed the orders of their creator. That meant there was no risk of Ralgwin being assaulted or the waste infecting them. In a military operation, this type of undead was easier to use.

"I was not quite sure if they would make it in time...but it seems they hurried over sooner than expected."

Since Grevanas's old Vandarion faction had to operate in secret, they couldn't bring too many forces. Moreover, the Imperial Palace was close, so once fighting broke out, it was highly likely that communications using gravitational waves would be jammed, shutting down warp or transfer gates, which would make it harder to bring in reinforcements. Yet forces were needed to settle things quickly, so Grevanas had struck a graveyard on the way here, creating a large amount of zombies and skeletons. Since they moved on foot, they had arrived later than his main forces but had made it before any fatal outcomes had occurred. Now the situation was leaning greatly in the old Vandarion faction's favor.

"I guess this isn't the time to be concerned about appearances..." Koutarou said and adjusted his grip on Signaltin. Grevanas would send out the undead to force an attack with no regard for losses, and Koutarou couldn't concern himself with appearances under the circumstances. He resolved to do what was necessary.

"Reminiscing with you may be fun, but that is not why I came back to life," said Grevanas. "If the opportunity presents itself, I would love to make up for my blunder from two thousand years ago."

He raised his staff and stood at the ready. As he did, the squirming undead moved forwards, in front of the soldiers, and formed the frontline. The horde of undead were completely under his control. At his order, they would all rush forwards.

“Let us do this, Blue Knight. Even you will struggle against this force!”

Grevanas swung down his staff. With that as their signal, the undead and soldiers attacked.

Koutarou had Signaltin, so any zombies and skeletons that moved through magic weren't much of a threat. The problem was their number. No matter how many he defeated, they would just keep on coming. What made things even trickier was that the enemy soldiers were blending in with the mass of undead. Wielding Forthorthe weapons meant they had a lot of firepower, and they would target Koutarou when he attacked the horde. Moreover, he couldn't make use of Signaltin's superiority against them. Its ability to disperse magic was useless, making it nothing more than a normal sword that could do a lot of damage. It wouldn't be hard to defeat the enemy using magic, but Grevanas would get in the way if they attempted to do so. As a result, they were simply whittling each other down.

“Your strategy before the battle began was wonderful, but it seems I am still one step ahead in terms of tactics, Blue Knight!”

Grevanas was composed, although it was hard to tell from his expression, seeing as his face was so dried out. The battle was playing out just as he had foreseen. Serving Maxfern and participating in wars until he had reached old age had given Grevanas a wealth of experience when it came to combat with magic. He had pushed back his initial disadvantage and was beginning to overwhelm Koutarou's group.

It wont be long until the Imperial Army collapses and I can break out Ralgwin. And then...

Grevanas was normally calm, but he was being hasty right now. The resurrection magic was complete. Once Ralgwin was recaptured, Maxfern could be brought back, at which point there would be no concealing him.

“Satomi-san, we can’t hold on like this!” Nana warned Koutarou as she kicked away a skeleton. She felt the familiar sensation of gradually losing the battle.

“I’ll take the front. If we don’t shut down Grevanas in the rear, they’ll push through!”

In contrast to Grevanas, Koutarou was panicking. He had sensed how bad the situation was. Grevanas wasn’t trying to wipe them out; his goal was to reach the car behind them and to get to Ralgwin. Koutarou was confident that he could protect his allies and himself, but it was difficult to keep the horde of undead from getting close to the car.

“That would put you in too much danger!” Nana protested.

“If I don’t, they’ll get Ralgwin!”

Grevanas’s experience was a problem. Despite Koutarou and the others being at an advantage overall, in this specific location, at this moment in time, they had a numbers deficit. They could turn it around if the other girls came to reinforce them, but their various battles were still being fought. Originally, it had been their job to stall the enemy, but now they were the ones being stalled. So Koutarou’s group would have to do something about it on their own. The quickest way was to defeat Grevanas, who was controlling the undead.

“Fine, but you will have to take me and Maki-san with you,” Nana insisted.

“That’s not... Okay, I understand. Let’s do that.” Koutarou had tried to object but quickly reconsidered and nodded. They didn’t have time to argue.

“Is that fine with you, Maki-san?” Nana asked.

“That’s my duty. Crimson, can we count on you?”

“Hm? Oh, right. Leave it to me. Infernal Fire—Modifier—Area—”

Crimson grinned and started her incantation. She would be casting a powerful fire spell.

“I will not let you cast such a large spell! Come, void area!” Noticing the gathering of mana, Grevanas countered with an incantation of his own. His was brief, and with a simple gesture, he finished his spell faster than Crimson. In that moment, the fireball gathering in front of her staff was snuffed out.

Grevanas had cast a spell that erased mana within a limited area.

“Quick Cast—Haste—Modifier—Area Effect!”

As the fireball was erased, another spell was cast by Maki. This one increased a target’s physical abilities to make them faster, and it affected not only Koutarou, Maki, and Nana, but also their nearby allies.

“I’ll leave the rest to you!” As the spell took effect, Koutarou took off running. Maki and Nana followed behind him.

“As you wish, Your Excellency!” the soldiers called as they focused their fire in front of Koutarou and the girls to support their charge.

That was when Grevanas realized that they had deceived him. “So that was your real goal!”

Even he struggled to cancel multiple spells simultaneously. Koutarou’s side had used Crimson’s spell as a diversion to successfully cast the one they really needed, which gave their charge an edge and gave the soldiers the power to support them. It would also help to keep the frontline stable once the trio had left. It was a well thought-out and very Maki-like use of magic, yet there had been one who had anticipated it.

The Gray Knight.

“You let your guard down, Grevanas. They have even taken your zombies’ slow speed into account.”

He appeared from out of the horde of undead and swung at the Imperial Army, which had lost a significant amount of fighting power with the departure of Koutarou, Nana, and Maki.

“Ahh, Knight-dono!”

“It was a good idea for sure, but without the Blue Knight, will you be able to stop me?”

The Gray Knight had lurked in the shadows and waited for Koutarou and the girls to set out. Even with their enhanced physical abilities, the regular soldiers would struggle against him. He figured it would be simple to break through to

where Ralgwin was.

“I would hope so,” came a new voice.

Kashing. A greatspear stopped the Gray Knight’s sword.

“Aha, you’re still here, Glendad’s Warrior Princess.”

The spear belonged to Nefilforan. Until now, she had been focusing on commanding the soldiers from the rear but had come forwards when Koutarou and the girls had charged.

“You won’t pass me easily, Gray Knight!”

Nefilforan kicked his torso to put some distance between them and swung her greatspear. Her movements were swift and fluid, displaying her mastery.

The greatspear and sword clashed once more—the Gray Knight wouldn’t go down easily either. He wielded his dull-gray knight sword in both hands and easily caught Nefilforan’s blow.

“Don’t forget about me!” Crimson swung down her greataxe, which slammed into the pavement.

Kaboom!

Her target quickly leaped back and landed a few steps away, having escaped danger.

“Your Highness, it would be best not to come into contact with that one,” Crimson warned Nefilforan. Unusually for Crimson, she was speaking respectfully to Nefilforan, who had said that she needed Crimson and taken her to the battlefield. It was like she had found her ideal boss.

“So it would seem. I’ll be careful,” Nefilforan said and glanced down at her right leg. She was wearing powered armor, but the armor on her left arm was distorted. He must have done something when she’d kicked him. Like Crimson said, it seemed that it would be best to avoid direct contact with the Gray Knight.

“Glendad and a former leader of Darkness Rainbow... I doubt I would be unable to win as is, but I can’t afford to take too much time...” The Gray Knight held his sword up high, and a whirlpool of chaos appeared.

Two gray shapes crawled out of it. Their appearance was indeterminate, constantly changing form. It was hard to tell if they were even living creatures or some sort of substance. They moved to either side of the Gray Knight as if to protect him.

You'd better hurry, Maki and Blue Knight! We won't be able to last long like this! Crimson wasn't a big fan of difficult things, but she was a highly skilled magician, and she could imagine what those vague things the Gray Knight had called forth were. As they belonged to chaos, they were dangerous regardless of whether or not they were living creatures.

As the gray things appeared, Sanae contacted their leader. "Koutarou, what's going on over there?! I'm feeling something really bad!" Even so far away, she had sensed the power of the whirlpool of chaos.

"The Gray Knight showed up! Princess Nefilforan and Crimson are fighting him, but it doesn't look great!" Koutarou answered as he cut through the horde of undead. He would have loved to have been the one fighting the Gray Knight, but that wasn't going to happen. Grevanas's horde had to be stopped or Ralgwin would be taken away. Moreover, Koutarou was already so close to Grevanas that returning now would be difficult, and he would lose a lot of time.

"I'll come over there as soon as we clean things up over here!" cried Sanae.

"Good!"

In spite of Sanae's declaration that her group would come to reinforce them, Koutarou suspected they wouldn't make it in time. The conclusion of the battle would probably come sooner than that, whether they won or lost.

To think the difference in experience would hurt this much... he thought.

With the gap in technology having been filled, Grevanas's experience had a large impact. Even the jamming to prevent reinforcements was working against them now. Only Grevanas had received reinforcements in the form of undead, overcoming the original disparity in forces.

"Let us finish this," said Grevanas. "Time might be on our side now, but that will not necessarily be the case later."

In reality, his superiority was built on a dangerous balance. If the battles in

any of the other locations ended, the girls would dash over to support the Blue Knight—not to mention reinforcements might soon show up through standard means of transport too.

“Spirits of time and space, heed my summons! Let the two pillars of power combine and open the gates of time space! Like stars shooting across the sky...” Grevanas held his staff up high and started his incantation.

Maki’s expression changed when she heard it. “This is bad, Satomi-kun! That incantation is for Teleport!”

Grevanas was casting the spell for teleportation. He would travel directly to the vehicle that Ralgwin was on.

“What?! I thought warping was being jammed!” Koutarou replied.

“It’s still possible to teleport to whatever you can see with the naked eye!”

Strictly speaking, it was gravitational waves that were being jammed. That prevented anyone from observing the location of a warp, making it impossible to use the ability. But that also meant it was possible if the location *could* be visibly observed. And it was even easier with magic.

“Also, Nefilforan-san has come out to the front, so there’s nobody who could oppose him near the car!” Nana pointed out, which showed how frightening Grevanas really was. His goal had always been to lure out anyone who was covering Ralgwin. That way, he could teleport close and then use the same technique to take Ralgwin away. Using multiple teleports was possible because Grevanas was a Grand Wizard and the distance was so short. In other words, he was taking advantage of Nefilforan being forced forwards by the Gray Knight.

“Sakuraba-senpai, use Signaltin to—”

“You are too late!” In that moment, Grevanas disappeared, cutting Koutarou off, his incantation finished and his teleportation completed. He was now right next to the car that Ralgwin was on.

“Damn it!” Koutarou yelled.

Maki immediately responded to the situation. “Satomi-kun, I will use teleport to send you over too!” She could use teleportation magic as well, not as freely

as Grevanas or Yurika, but just once from their current distance wouldn't be a problem.

Grevanas, however, sneered at them. "You are constantly one step behind, Blue Knight! Spirits of time and space, heed my summons!"

With a cracking sound, Grevanas's withered arm destroyed the rear door. Whether it was raw strength or perhaps some kind of magic, he tore through it like cardboard. And he started the incantation to teleport as he did. Once he got Ralgwin, he would teleport back out.

"Gahahahaha, I knew this was where you were, Ralgwin!"

Grevanas's sunken and empty eyes discovered Ralgwin in a bed inside of the car. He'd been put to sleep for the transfer, but even if he had been conscious, he was fixed to the bed so that he couldn't move.

"With this... With this, my desire will finally be fulfilled! At last, I can resurrect —"

Bang!

That was when it happened. Grevanas reached out towards Ralgwin with a wicked smile on his face. If he took his hand and teleported again, he would be victorious."

Augh?!" Grevanas's hand stopped. The shock kept him from moving. At some point, a large hole had opened in his chest.

"Keep your dirty hands off of Ralgwin-sama!" Fasta had snuck up on Grevanas and shot him with a large-caliber gun.

"Y-You're, Ralgwin's aide—"

Bang, bang, bang! Fasta didn't answer, mercilessly continuing to shoot him. She was using an anti-material rifle, which was normally used against vehicles. Holding it in both arms, she shot without properly aiming, but that wasn't a concern at such close range. Grevanas was far sturdier than any normal human, but even he couldn't withstand an anti-material rifle shooting him from that close. Moreover, he was in the middle of his incantation and wasn't using any defensive spells. Each bullet hit home and carved a large hole into his body.

“Fasta-san?! You show up *now*?!” Koutarou’s eyes widened in surprise. Fasta had made her appearance at the worst possible time.

I guess this is the only timing she had! Koutarou realized. With their inferior forces, she could only take advantage of the moment Koutarou’s group was clashing with the old Vandarion faction. The moment the enemy had made their move had been her only option.

“What are you going to do, Satomi-san?!” Nana wore a rigid expression. Dealing with one more enemy now would be difficult.

After thinking for a moment, Koutarou came to a decision. “We’re going to support Fasta-san! If she falls here, we’ll be in trouble too!”

“Are you serious?!” His decision surprised Nana. Her large eyes opened wide as she looked up at him.

“It’s a matter of priorities! The biggest problem would be if Grevanas took Ralgwin away, not Fasta-san!”

Unfortunately, they didn’t have any real chance of defeating both Fasta and Grevanas. If anything, Fasta was acting as their final shield protecting Ralgwin. If they were to attack her here, Grevanas would escape with Ralgwin and attempt to resurrect Maxfern.



If they instead protected Fasta, Maxfern wouldn't be resurrected, at the very least. Moreover, it was unlikely that Fasta would rejoin the old Vandarion faction after taking Ralgwin away. Grevanas was currently leading them, which meant it was better to leave Ralgwin in Fasta's care for a while rather than giving him up to Grevanas. They could simply pursue and arrest Ralgwin afterwards.

"I guess we have to!" Nana understood the situation as well. Although reluctantly, she agreed with Koutarou and quickly gave her subordinates instructions.

"Nefilforan unit, do not attack that woman!"

The soldiers quickly cried out their acknowledgments.

"Understood! Did you get that, everyone?!"

"We got it, Nana-chin!"

"Is she that girl from the other time?"

"So it would seem."

"I'm glad we don't have to shoot her."

And with that, the battle continued as before. Not a single bullet flew at Fasta.

So, the Blue Knight chose not to shoot me...

Fasta glanced at Koutarou for a moment. She wore a mystified look. Normally, she wouldn't have complained about being shot at in this situation, and she had been prepared for as much. But Koutarou wasn't attacking. Fasta sensed that he and the others saw Grevanas as such a threat that letting her intervene was the only option available to them.

"In that case..." Fasta looked back at Grevanas and opened fire again. In contrast to how she was looking at Koutarou's side, her eyes were cold and piercing. She showed no hesitation in pulling the trigger either.

"Ugh, damn it!"

As a lich, Grevanas had a tenacious body, but even he struggled after being shot repeatedly by an anti-material rifle. He used the teleport he was chanting out to disappear from Fasta's sight.

"He vanished?! It's that magic again?!" Fasta cried.

"Kill that girl! I don't care how many casualties there are!" Having escaped from Fasta, Grevanas gave his order from within the horde of undead. It was a very simple order to attack. He needed to keep Fasta from taking Ralgwin away no matter what. Even he hadn't anticipated her surprise attack and had no countermeasures in place, so his plan relied on brute force.

The horde ignored the soldiers they had been fighting and launched themselves towards Fasta.

"Gah!"

Fasta threw away her anti-material rifle. It had been necessary against Grevanas, but it wasn't particularly suitable against the undead. She switched over to a submachine gun and intercepted the oncoming horde. In addition, the unmanned crafts that had been deployed around her attacked as well.

It wasn't enough to stop their advance. The Imperial Army had cut down their numbers, but there were still too many of them.

"Grevanas is getting absurd! Aika-san, I'm counting on you!" said Koutarou.

"Yes!" Maki replied.

The undead were dropping like flies, creating a literal mountain of bodies. But it would be over if the ones that broke through managed to kill Fasta, so reinforcements were necessary to avoid a fatal outcome. The quickest way was to send over reinforcements with Maki's Teleport.

That was when Nana got a message on her communications device. "Hold on! Reinforcements are coming!"

"Nana-chin, Navy, you okay?!" Orange's voice came through the comms. She sounded unusually nervous and worried.

"We're safe, but not okay, so hurry!" Nana answered.

"Got it! Everyone, Nana-chin says to do it right away!"

The reinforcements were the court magicians. Koutarou's side had a plan for dealing with Grevanas's magic. The court magicians had been preparing countermeasures against him, but it had taken time and they were only now ready to use it.

"Warn everyone over there to stop using magic right away!" Orange instructed.

"Okay! Everyone, if you're using magic, stop right now! It's dangerous!" Nana relayed.

"Here we go! Ritual—Anti-Magic Field! deploying over a wide area!"

In the next moment, an orange light filled the area where Koutarou and the others were fighting. The court magicians had cast ritual magic. Five of them plus Yurika surrounded a magic circle and cast the spell Anti-Magic Field, which was the same as the one Grevanas had previously used against Crimson. His version had covered a small area and erased mana, making magic temporarily unusable, but with six magicians working together over a longer span of time, the area was much larger—enough to fill the entire area.

"Agh! Aaahhhhhh!" Grevanas was greatly affected by the spell. His body was full of holes that Fasta had made, and he had been in the process of using mana to heal them. Because of that, the magic that was healing his injuries and easing his pain abruptly stopped. His wounds reopened, and a murky liquid dripped down from them. His dried-out face twisted in pain.

"Oooohhhhhh!"

"Aahhhhhhhh!"

The horde of undead were also affected. Since they had been animated with magic, they suddenly stopped their movements and fell down. Many became normal corpses once more. As a result, the old Vandarion faction quickly lost their advantage, their only fighting force now being their normal soldiers and the Gray Knight.

"What a pain!" The Gray Knight clicked his tongue. The sword he used was affected by the ritual magic as well, meaning it had lost a lot of power. Moreover, the indeterminate lumps that had been called forth by the whirlpool

of chaos used mana to move and attack, so their movements had dulled.

“I’m not normally one to talk, but you rely too much on that sword and magic!” Crimson attacked the Gray Knight. She wasn’t using her usual axe, but a beam sword that the Imperial Army soldiers used. Her axe was simply her staff, transformed using magic, so it wasn’t usable in this situation. But she had known to expect as much and had brought a substitute. “The age of magicians using nothing but magic is over!”

“Damn it, I was lured in!”

“You got that right!!!”

The Gray Knight used his sword to fight back against Crimson’s beam sword, but with his sword weakened and Crimson’s unexpected fighting style due to her new weapon, he couldn’t counterattack.

“Not to mention, my princess doesn’t use magic at all!” yelled Crimson.

“Haaah!” cried Nefilforan.

Crimson wasn’t the Gray Knight’s only opponent. Nefilforan’s greatspear approached from his blind spot while he was busy fending off the beam sword.

“Tsk!” The Gray Knight threw his body aside to avoid the attack, but he was unable to fully dodge it, and the armor around his shoulder was crushed, the mantle cut up. If he hadn’t dodged when he had, the greatspear would have pierced his chest.

“Crimson, those shapes’ movements have grown dull. They don’t have the same vigor as before.” Nefilforan spun her greatspear around and pointed the tip at the Gray Knight. They’d been struggling against him before, but now they could fight on even ground. The power of his sword had weakened, as had the gray lumps. The frequency with which they interfered with magic had visibly decreased.

What to do... Do I continue fighting, or move to back up Grevanas, or maybe even retreat? This is such a pain... the Gray Knight mused. The ritual magic’s effect would keep him at a disadvantage until it ran out. But being ritual magic, he doubted the court magicians were stupid enough to let it run out too

quickly. He was faced with a decision. “Not good...”

And that wasn't the only problem. A new one had appeared, as Fasta accessed the car transporting Ralgwin.

“I suppose there's no other way. We'll give up on retaking Ralgwin unharmed, Grevanas!” the Gray Knight concluded based on the circumstances.

Using the computer in his armor, he ordered the surrounding soldiers to attack the car that Ralgwin was in.

As the undead fell, the first thing Fasta thought about was Ralgwin. She sensed that if she let this opportunity slip by, she would never get another one.

“Ralgwin-sama!”

The rear door had been destroyed by Grevanas. She slid through that and finally found the person she had been pursuing for so long.

“It's noisy outside, Fasta.” Ralgwin was conscious. And he looked up at Fasta with a peaceful expression.

“I am sorry, Ralgwin-sama! The road is congested.”

It had been a very long journey. Ever since she had left Ralgwin's side, she'd been running nonstop for this sake. She was tearing up at the chance to finally speak with him again.

“It's not over yet,” he warned her. “You can save your tears for later.”

“Y-Yes, I'm sorry!”

She quickly wiped the tears away and reached out to him. Ralgwin hadn't just been put to sleep; his body had also been secured so that he wouldn't fall off the bed while being transported.

“Your hand, please,” said Fasta.

“Sorry for the trouble,” he answered. Once freed from the restraints, Ralgwin sat up.

“Can you stand?”

“That'll be hard. I can't quite move my body.” He was conscious, but the

effects of the drugs hadn't fully dissipated yet.

"I thought as much. Please use this." Fasta had made her plan with the assumption that Ralgwin would be unconscious, and she had prepared a tool to carry him.

"So that's what you've got... You're well prepared."

"It's an honor." She attached a small device to his waist.

Ralgwin quickly stood up and faced Fasta. "This is quite a convenient tool."

"This PAF has AI for automatic movement. It perceives its surroundings and will bring you somewhere safe."

Surprisingly, she had chosen a PAF as the tool to carry him out. PAF had an independent action mode in case of emergency built into it. It was intended to carry an injured or unconscious person somewhere safe. With it, she could bring Ralgwin along and escape even if he couldn't move his own body.

"How are your injuries?" she asked.

"I can't feel any pain. It must be the drugs. Now, how do we proceed from here?"

"We will regroup with the others. Please follow me."

Fasta knew that she had no time. She immediately headed for the exit. As she did, the PAF sensed her moving and followed, as it had been instructed to do from the start.

Boom! Just before they could leave the vehicle, it happened. An explosion went off right next to them, shaking the car. Fortunately, neither Fasta nor Ralgwin fell over, but there was more than one explosion.

Boom, boom, boom, boom! Explosions were happening repeatedly around the vehicle. Moreover, bullets and lasers were flying just outside the doorway.

“There’s a battle right outside?!”

“No, it’s Grevanas or the Gray Knight. They’ve figured out what you are trying to do and are stalling us here.”

Ralgwin had already guessed who was behind the attack and what their intention was. Koutarou’s side would have no need to attack the car. Moreover, the old Vandarion faction’s soldiers wouldn’t do something like this of their own accord, so either Grevanas or the Gray Knight must have given them the order. They had given up on recapturing Ralgwin safely and begun their assault knowing the risk it posed to him.

“Very well. We will use our last resort,” Fasta murmured.

“What are you planning to do?”

“It’s going to be a little reckless. Please get down and wait.” Fasta used her bracelet to input a command. It was a Hail Mary she had devised to be used against Grevanas and the Gray Knight.

The first to notice the spaceship was Ruth, sitting in the Hidden Leaves’ operator seat. At first, she had thought she was seeing things. It looked like the ship had appeared out of thin air. But upon confirming the observational data, she realized that it was real and reported back in a hurry.

“Your Highness! Master! an unidentified spaceship has appeared!”

“What?! Now of all times?!”

Theia was in the middle of a battle against the old Vandarion faction

battleship, not to mention the city was close, so it frayed her mind. If another enemy ship joined the battle, the situation would be grave.

Koutarou's face turned pale, and he shot Ruth a question. "Where is it?!"

Battles were taking place in five locations, but the situation would greatly change depending on where the ship was headed.

"It is currently in the sky above Fornorn, accelerating toward point F!"

"So it's coming here!" Koutarou had a bad feeling about the ship heading their way. It was going to join the battle.

"Where did it even come from?! How did it slip through the air defense net?!" Theia was confused. Fornorn had a high concentration of important buildings, including the Imperial Palace and Parliament. Because of that, there serious efforts had been made to prevent spacecraft from intruding into their airspace, and warping was routinely disabled at key points. That was why only a single old Vandarion faction ship had managed to infiltrate and was even then unable to find an advantageous position.

Grevanas knew that and had used small vessels disguised as civilian ships to descend from orbit. Sneaking in that way was the best he could do. Moreover, all ships had been intercepted, which was why an attack with a normal fleet had never even been considered. Chances were much higher when having forces slowly infiltrate on the surface and launching a simultaneous uprising.

If Grevanas had had more time, that was surely what he would have done. But this spaceship was different. It had suddenly appeared inside of the defensive net. Seeing as that was supposed to be impossible, it was natural for Theia to be surprised.

"From the sea! It came from below the water!" Ruth cried.

"The sea?!" Theia echoed.

The craft in question was a multipurpose ship and could navigate underwater. It had used that capability to approach from the sea and slip past their defensive net.

"But the sea has surveillance too!" said Theia. "It may be a small ship

infiltrating on its own. In order to slip past both radar and sonar, you would need the special forces to...ah.”

“Right. If that ship is related to Fasta-san, it’s not impossible,” Kiriha agreed.

The Imperial Army’s special forces were responsible for setting up the surveillance net in the sea. Before Vandarion’s rebellion, Fasta had been a member of the special forces and would have had access to such information. It would have been useless if the surveillance net was altered after the rebellion, but for better or worse, that hadn’t happened.

“What do we do?! Do we intercept?!” asked Theia.

“It’s too dangerous! They’re already over populated areas!” Ruth answered.

“If it’s someone working for Grevanas, this spells trouble...” said Koutarou. He and the others believed that Fasta could pull it off, but that was just conjecture. It was still possible the ship belonged to the old Vandarion faction.

Grevanas had become undead and gained a sturdy body, but that wasn’t necessarily the case once his mana was neutralized. If shot by a gun, his wound wouldn’t heal, and a murky liquid was still leaking out of him. Moreover, the pain wasn’t being relieved, so the more wounds he got, the more pain he was in, although thanks to his durability, the wounds wouldn’t kill him, they would only add to his pain. A normal person would be unconscious or mad by now, but the mental fortitude of a Grand Wizard allowed him to withstand it.

“They got me... I suppose the current empress of Forthorthe already has a deep connection to Folsaria...” he muttered.

Grevanas could stand the pain, but he hated that his own assumptions had brought about a major blunder. He hadn’t accounted for a group of magicians on Forthorthe’s side attacking with ritual magic. He had known that the Blue Knight had two or three magicians at his side, but not that there were enough to assist in such a large operation.

This ritual magic had clearly required many magicians. Even if they were all archwizards, there had to be at least five of them, meaning the Blue Knight and royal families had close to ten archwizards—or enough magicians to match that

amount of mana—working for them.

Still, it would be cruel to blame Grevanas's ego for the blunder. The fact was, Koutarou and the others had resolved the problems in Folsaria, and Elfaria, realizing the dangers of magic, had invited the leaders of Darkness Rainbow to work for her. Knowing how disorderly Folsaria had been when it was first founded, Grevanas hadn't imagined a group of magicians could be sent over so quickly.

"But I won't let you leave like this, Ralgwin! After all, you are Maxfern-sama's precious body!"

Having been cornered, Grevanas had given the order to attack the car. The assault would stall Ralgwin, buying time so that they could recover. Naturally, Grevanas was well aware that this was a dangerous choice. It would all be for nothing if Ralgwin were to die. But he couldn't afford to let him get away either. The Gray Knight wasn't in position to make a move, so Grevanas had made the difficult call.

But his plans were abruptly halted.

"What is that ship?!" he cried.

A scarlet spacecraft had suddenly appeared, and it began attacking the old Vandarion faction soldiers.

"Where did it come from?! Is this an ambush that the Blue Knight prepared?!"

The hull of the scarlet ship had been engraved with the name Gelaurodis II. It looked far too elegant for a warship, yet too ferocious for a passenger vessel. It used two types of weapons to attack. First were two laser cannons, which were mainly focusing on anti-air weapons and those stalling Ralgwin and Fasta. They were protecting the ship and getting in the way of the stalling tactics.

The other type of weapon was smoke grenades. Gelaurodis II was attacking on its own, and going after each soldier individually was horribly inefficient. But blowing them all away would destroy the city. That was where smoke grenades came in. Since most of the old Vandarion faction soldiers were infantry, their attacks could be stopped by depriving them of their vision. They couldn't afford to shoot blindly and risk hitting Ralgwin.

“Curse yooooouuuu! How could this be allowed to happen?! Maxfern-sama is just within my reach! And that man will serve as his body!” Grevanas screamed as he glared at the scarlet spaceship. But he couldn’t do anything until he got out of the anti-magic field.

Grevanas wasn’t the only one looking up at Gelaurudis II. Having been attacked, the old Vandarion faction soldiers looked up. As so many enemies suddenly took their attention off her, Crimson realized what was happening above. When she looked up as well, she was greeted by the sight of a crimson spaceship. The craft was familiar to her. Its shape had changed a little, but it was a custom-built vessel, so there was no way she would mistake it.

She hurriedly contacted her allies. “Everyone, look!”

“What’s going on, Crimson? Your face is pale... Is that the Gelaurudis?!” cried Green.

“Is it the young master and Maya?! They survived!” Orange exclaimed.

Her allies, Green and Orange, had also recognized the ship. It belonged to their comrades, Elexis and Maya, who they had last seen aboard the Gelaurudis.

“Hang on, Orange, I understand how you feel but we don’t know if Elexis and Maya are on board,” Purple warned them. She understood how Orange felt; in fact, she’d always been on the lookout for the two deep down. But they couldn’t let their emotions get the better of them and lead to a wrong decision. This was a crucial moment.

“That’s not true! I don’t know about Maya, but it has to be the young master! Who else would ride such a flashy spaceship?” yelled Orange. She was already convinced. It wasn’t logic; she just knew that this was the return of the comrades they were looking for.

“You heard them, El,” came Maya’s voice.

“Please stop with the ‘young master’ thing, Orange,” Elexis added.

Orange was quickly proven correct as the new arrivals’ faces were shown over the comms. And when it happened, Orange’s expression lit up.

“Whaaaat?! You will always be the young master!” she cried.

“Don’t call me that during battle, at least,” Elexis protested.

“Maya! Elexis! You’re alive!” Yellow called out. Contrary to the smiling Orange, she was in tears. She had been worried ever since the pair had gone missing, thinking they had died. Moreover, she was worried that her comrades had been losing their stride, so she was very relieved to see these two again.

“Alive, perhaps, but it took this long to recover,” Maya explained.

“Not to mention the Blue Knight Mark cast dark clouds over my new shipping company,” Elexis added.

“If you were alive, why didn’t you call us?! We were looking for you for so long!” Green yelled in anger. She was furious with them for failing to make contact despite having been alive all this time. And, of course, she had been very worried.

“Don’t be too angry, Green. We are still wanted for trying to overthrow the throne. Besides, it seems you have taken on an official position,” said Elexis.

They did feel bad about not contacting the others, but they’d had their reasons. Like Vandarion, they were traitors and still wanted. Getting in touch with the girls, who had become court magicians, would have put them at risk. They knew they would let the girls know the truth at some point, and that moment just happened to be now.

“Everyone, shut up! You can save the squabbling for later!” Crimson yelled at the confused group, getting straight to the point. “Maya, El, whose side are you on?!” She could understand that they were happy. She was too. But if they didn’t clarify who was fighting for whom upfront, they wouldn’t get anywhere. A lot of lives were at stake.

“Nobody’s side in particular...” Elexis answered. “We are the enemies of Grevanas and the Gray Knight! We would never side with people with such a lack of flair!”

“I will always be on the side of the beautiful,” Maya added.

Their answers were clear and proved that the two really had returned. So

Crimson forced back the tears welling up in her eyes, and the joy trying to burst out of her chest, and shouted even more.

“Then help us! Unlike you, those of us in service to the court are busy!”



“...You’ve become the strictest one in the group since we last met, Crimson,” Elexis muttered.

“Stop talking and get to work, young master!” called Orange.

“You never change...”

An astonished Yurika looked on at the entire exchange. The atmosphere around the court magicians had completely shifted compared to what it was before. They were a lot more energized now, and their wills were strong.

It makes sense. If Satomi-san disappeared, we’d be depressed too.

Yurika smiled as she came to that realization. No matter the details, the court magicians’ friends had returned, and Yurika genuinely welcomed it.

As it turned out, when Elexis had received a rescue call from Fasta, he had immediately sent out the Gelaurudis II. There were two reasons the multipurpose spaceship bore that name. First, the spacecraft was based on another ship called Gelaurudis, and secondly, the person at the helm had a personality similar to the legendary female pirate.

“Maya, charge in! I will deal with the anti-air weapons!” Elexis announced.

“You better not be wrong about this, El!”

This ship had a crew of two: the helmsman and the gunner. Maya, the helmsman, was no less brave than the legendary female pirate, which was why Elexis had named the ship as he had. After repairing and refurbishing it, he hadn’t seen a need to change the name and had simply added the number.

“Don’t worry. Koutarou-kun is on the surface. I’m sure the Blue Knight will do a good job!” he said.

“That’s not what I am talking about!” Maya replied. “You work too! You’re the man who tried to take over the empire once before aren’t you?!”

“I ended up feeling satisfied after saving the world with Koutarou-kun.”

“This man... You really are an idiot!”

It was hard to tell if Elexis was serious or joking based on his tone, since he

was always so vague about such things. But he still did his job. Even now. he was attacking enemy weapons with laser fire and laying down a smokescreen over the soldiers. But his constant theatrics made it hard to appreciate his achievements. As a result, Maya's evaluation of him was very low, although he seemed to enjoy even that.

"That said, there is a lady trying to proceed in a logical manner waiting for help. As reluctant as I may be, I will be serious today," he said.

Today was special. Someone risking their life to save their savior was awaiting their help. Elexis had never been a stickler for right or wrong, but he had a heart that saw the beauty in people attempting to follow their convictions. In essence, he didn't care about the flowers themselves, but how they bloomed. Whenever he did see a bud, he hoped they would blossom into a beautiful flower, in hopes that he would be able to witness a beautiful bouquet.

"You should have just said so from the start..." Maya said with a sigh and sped up.

As they got closer, the enemy fired four guided missiles at them, but Elexis, sitting in the gunner seat, intercepted them. All four missiles were pierced by lasers and scattered.

"I can't laugh anymore. I don't like their way of doing things." Unlike before, Elexis's expression and words had grown harsh. He was showing an unusually serious side. He didn't like how the old Vandarion faction, and Grevanas in particular, did things. He hated those who sought to accomplish their goals no matter what. And based on how the fight was going, Elexis had come to hate Grevanas. As such, there was no hesitation as he pulled the trigger.

If only you always acted like this, I would have nothing to complain about... Maya thought to herself, and that was her only point of complaint when he was acting this way.

"Maya, charge right in using the shortest route."

"Are you sure? Can you block all of the enemy's attacks?!"

"Thanks to Fasta-kun's data, I have a full grasp of where the anti-air weapons are located. Moreover, there won't be any magical interference right now."

“In that case...let’s go, El!”

Maya accelerated even more and took complex evasive actions. Surprisingly, the Imperial Army wasn’t attacking, but the old Vandarion faction had identified them as an enemy and launched a fierce attack. Not only were there guided missiles, there were also anti-air cannon and lasers as well.

Maya and Elexis worked together to weave through the minor gaps. Their reunion with their comrades would happen shortly afterward. In order for Elexis and Maya to save Fasta, they would need to jump into enemy fire. One saving grace was that many of the anti-air weapons had already been silenced. As long as they paid attention to the remaining ones, it wouldn’t be impossible to close in. The hull wasn’t weak enough to be damaged by infantry gear.

“Want help, Elexis?”

Even more thankfully was that someone was offering them a hand. And of all people, it was his old nemesis, the Blue Knight. Koutarou smiled as he called out to him.

“It’s a welcome offer...but are you sure about that? We are currently wanted criminals.”

“In this situation, you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. Take Fasta-san and Ralgwin away while the anti-magic field is still in effect.”

Normally, Koutarou would need to capture not just Fasta, but Elexis and Maya as well. Right now, however, they were the only three who could protect Ralgwin. If he made the wrong decision, Grevanas would steal the man away, so in order to avoid that worst possible outcome, it was best to turn a blind eye to Elexis’s and Maya’s crimes for now.

“I understand your point, but we have no intention of giving ourselves up or returning him later. Are you okay with that?”

“With you guys, there’s still a chance we’ll catch you later. But—”

“If Ralgwin is captured by Grevanas, there won’t be a later for him, is that it?”

“You know that too, which is why you’re working with Fasta-san, right?” said Koutarou. The old Elexis and Maya might not have answered Fasta’s request,

but perhaps they were different now, he thought.

“Got it. Then lend us a hand, Blue Knight-kun.”

Elexis hadn't denied his suggestion, and that was a welcome realization for Koutarou.

“You should've just said so from the start, Elexis,” said Koutarou.

“Even the Blue Knight is telling you, El,” Maya interjected.

“Well, I am a serious criminal; there are certain paths I have to follow.” A smile was on Elexis's face.

As a woman, Maya couldn't tell what kind of emotions was behind that smile, but she understood that it was best to let it be. She focused on piloting instead of making any remarks.

“Blue Knight, we will arrive on the surface in another thirty seconds! Shut the enemy up for a moment!” Elexis ordered.

He and Maya were on fire right now, but they would be putting themselves in a very dangerous situation soon when they descended to pick up Fasta and Ralgwin. The spaceship would come to a stop and land, leaving it defenseless. So Koutarou and the others would need to protect it.

“Got it! I'll leave the rest to you two, then!”

“I may have failed at managing my corporation, but I will make this job a success!”

In order to avoid any danger during the landing, both sides had needed to come to an agreement. Once everything was decided, Koutarou focused on a group of enemies. They were attacking the car from a distance, but if they were taken out in twenty seconds, Elexis and Maya could land safely.

“I'll help too, Satomi-kun.” Maki lined up next to Koutarou. She was holding a spiritual energy rifle, which was unusual for her. Because of the anti-magic field, she couldn't really use magic at the moment, but having come from a military organization, she was used to handling guns.

“Sorry for all the trouble today, Aika-san,” Koutarou apologized.

“Crimson looks happy, so I thought I should lend a hand,” Maki said and glanced behind her, where she saw Crimson and Nefilforan fighting the Gray Knight.

“Wahahaha, let’s keep at it, you gray bastard! I think you’ll find I’m different today!” Crimson was unable to use magic, but she swung her beam sword around and pushed back the Gray Knight.

The Gray Knight was unable to fully use his powers due to his mana being cut off as well, and was being overwhelmed by Crimson’s superior spirit. Nefilforan was a short distance away, backing Crimson up by shooting beams. They had decided that this form would be more advantageous due to Crimson’s inability to access her magic. Their combined efforts had completely shut down the Gray Knight’s movements.

“I think you’re right,” Koutarou agreed. He could imagine how Crimson was feeling. She was probably more elated than Koutarou to find out that Elexis was alive. He understood Maki’s desire to add a touch of color.

“Then I’ll have to go too, before Maya comes out,” said Nana, wielding a gun in each hand. Since they could use both mana and spiritual energy bullets, the weapons were usable even under the current circumstances.

“Wouldn’t it be best if you stayed behind, Nana-san?” Koutarou was a little reluctant. Her body had been made using magic, so her physical abilities were only around seventy percent of what they normally were. She was now as weak as she appeared.

“We have to go even if I am an inexperienced conscript. We have to protect Fasta-san, am I wrong?” Weak or not, she was a former genius magical girl. She hadn’t lost sight of the path they needed to tread.

“Jeez, I guess everyone is an idiot... Let’s go you two!” Koutarou muttered and pulled out Saguratin instead of Signaltin. With the surrounding mana erased, Saguratin was stronger.

“I will follow you anywhere,” Maki told him.

“I’ll provide support, so you two go on ahead,” said Nana.

The atmosphere had completely changed with the appearance of Elexis and

Maya. It wasn't just the court magicians; Kotuarou and the others were feeling more positive as well. That was just how much the return of that pair meant to them.

Although the undead attack had come to an end, Fasta and Ralgwin were unable to leave the car due to the old Vandarion faction. There were no explosions hitting the car directly, although the soldiers would likely favor a direct hit over letting them get away, but right now, the enemy only had to stall them. So while bullets might slam into the armored car, the bombardments didn't.

Even if they're equipped for combat, will they be able to land in this situation? Fasta wondered. Her last hope was the approaching ship. She had connected with them through a supplier, but they were said to be very good at what they did. Still, Fasta wasn't confident that they would be able to land in this storm of attacks.

"Calm down, Fasta. Whatever happens will happen."

"But Ralgwin-sama—"

"You know as well as I do that this is because I was unable to give up the fight. My defeat was not at the hands of our enemies, but time. It's not your fault. If you made any mistakes, it was coming here to save me."

"I will come save you, wherever you may be."

"I know. You are the same as me. I have no complaints about that. But acknowledge that this situation is next to impossible. Even the opportunity to come for me should have been scarce. So just calm down and wait, or you will not be able to grasp at a chance even if it presents itself." "Ralgwin-sama... Yes, I will take that to heart."

Fasta had started to run around in circles in a panic, but she was able to calm down thanks to Ralgwin. She felt like his forgiveness saved her as well.

Beep.

"Fasta-kun, can you hear me?"

A familiar voice came over the comms. It was the voice of the courier she had hired.

“I can hear you, courier.”

“We’re going to land in fifteen seconds. So be prepared to hurry aboard.”

“You’re going to land in this rain of bullets?!”

“Not to worry! Our hero will be performing a miracle for us!”

“Hero?”

Fasta suddenly realized that their surroundings had gotten quieter. The explosions and bullets had grown distant. For some reason, there weren’t any impacts nearby. Instead, they could hear the sounds of engines above them. Soon, the force from the boosters started shaking the car.

“Okay, we’ll be right there! Ralgwin-sama!”

“I’ll leave it to you and follow your timing!” he replied.

“Okay!”

Fasta couldn’t confirm conditions with her own eyes, but she had no choice but to run regardless. So she put her faith in the idea that this was the very chance Ralgwin had been talking about.

Before Ralgwin could escape the anti-magic field, the scarlet spaceship had reached him. And with that, Grevanas’s plans were shattered. The Blue Knight had silenced his soldiers’ attack, and Ralgwin and Fasta had boarded the spaceship. All Grevanas could do was watch it happen.

“We’re falling back, Gray Knight! We’re going to follow that spaceship!” he yelled, even now refusing to give up on Ralgwin. His voice trembled in anger, and those who heard it felt his insanity.

“Got it. I’ll head over to you.” In contrast, the Gray Knight answered indifferently. He had no objections to retreating, since it was clear that the plan was falling apart. With Ralgwin and Fasta leaving, there was no point in staying.

“Damn you, Ralgwin! Don’t get full of yourself, Blue Knight! I spent a long

time getting this far! Just a little longer and I can resurrect Maxfern-sama! I won't stand for losing my chance over something like this!!!" Grevanas yelled.

In a normal military operation, this would have been the time to give up and retreat. Trying to pursue an enemy over another enemy's capital was insanity. However, Grevanas had no intention of leaving. He would recapture Ralgwin now, no matter how many casualties it took.

Everyone's Stakes

Friday, November 11th

After Ralgwin and Fasta departed on Gelaurudis II, Koutarou was surprised to see that Grevanas still hadn't given up his pursuit. It didn't make any strategic sense.

"Why does Grevanas still try to fight?! Doesn't he care if they're wiped out?!" Koutarou asked.

By pulling out now, the old Vandarion faction would be able to escape. Theia was unable to go all out on her attack, so the enemy battleship was still present. Moreover, Koutarou and the others had to pursue Gelaurudis II, and Grevanas and the Gray Knight were present as well. There was a good chance for them to escape, yet they didn't.

Once Grevanas and the Gray Knight had boarded the battleship, it began chasing after Gelaurudis II. This decision was nonsensical. Thanks to the ship's hurry to pick up Grevanas and the Gray Knight, a lot of soldiers had been lost and the spacecraft had all but lost its chance to escape. Hidden Leaves, in addition to reinforcing the battleships, had begun pursuing it. They would be wiped out, and Koutarou was struggling to understand why anyone would make that choice.

"Grevanas likely can't turn back," Kiriha explained. "If he loses here, he will lose his leadership position, and the old Vandarion faction will fall apart after failing to bring Ralgwin back. It would be difficult for splintered groups to reclaim Ralgwin on their own. This is their only chance, and he can't pass it up. So he doesn't have the time to bother with casualties."

She couldn't comprehend Grevanas's decision either, but if Koutarou were on the verge of death and this pursuit was the only chance to save his life, she wasn't confident that she would handle it any differently.

"Anyway, Kiriha-san, follow them! We will be right behind you!" Koutarou said.

“Understood.”

Even if they didn’t comprehend how Grevanas felt, they couldn’t let him continue. Koutarou had Hidden Leaves go ahead with Kiriha and others on board. Once his group had cleaned up the enemies, they would follow on Clan’s Cradle.

“Veltlion, I will be there in one minute!” Clan announced.

“I hope we make it...before they can catch up...”

Gelaurudis II was a high-spec multipurpose warship. But that was only when comparing it to ships of the same size. It was hard to imagine that it would be able to escape a battleship. As a spaceship meant for a small crew, it couldn’t even warp, and its jamming or stealth technologies wouldn’t be able to beat the battleship’s sensors. It was hard to imagine that Gelaurudis II would be able to shake off Grevanas’s pursuit.

Although Koutarou expected Gelaurudis II to be at a disadvantage, the situation on board was even worse than he knew.

“EI, this is a problem. The generator’s output is unstable,” Maya reported with a frown as she piloted the ship. Much of her body had been replaced with artificial parts, which meant that she could directly connect to the ship’s systems. She could feel the damage it had taken without looking. The sensation of its heart pulsing erratically was a sign that the power was failing.

“I suppose we couldn’t make it out unharmed,” Elexis answered, immediately realizing why. During its escape, Gelaurudis II had taken damage all over. Koutarou and the others had done what they could, but they hadn’t been able to protect the ship perfectly. The damage was serious, and it struggled to accelerate.

Seeing the situation, Fasta made her decision. “I suppose it can’t be helped. Courier, I will leave the rest to you.” She got up from her seat.

Elexis already had an idea of what she was thinking. “Are you sure, Fasta-kun?”

“There’s no other way.”

“Very well. I will do as you wish.”

He used his computer to unlock the hatch leading to the back of the ship, and Fasta quickly made her way to it.

“Hang on, Fasta, what are you planning to do?!” Ralgwin demanded.

“I will become a decoy. Ralgwin-sama, please escape with these two.”

With their speed falling, it was hard to imagine they could make it without a sacrifice, so Fasta would leave Gelaurudis II and serve as a decoy to aid Ralgwin’s escape.

“Stop it! Are you trying to kill yourself?!” Ralgwin protested. He wanted to stop Fasta, but the drugs in his system kept him from moving freely. In addition, the PAF followed Fasta’s order and wouldn’t move. All Ralgwin could do was try to stop her with words.

“It’s okay. Now that we are this far, there is no need to win,” Fasta said and smiled. Being able to do this much was enough for her. It had been a gamble to begin with, so she had gone in prepared to give her life. On top of that, she had previously opposed Ralgwin and put many of her allies in danger, so she felt it was time to take responsibility.

“This is an order, Fasta! Stop it right now!”

“I can’t follow that order. After all, I am no longer your subordinate.”

Fasta turned her back on Ralgwin and left the cockpit. She would be lying if she said that she had no lingering attachments, but this was something she had to do. She had to buy time, even if it was just enough for Koutarou and the others to come.

As a multipurpose ship, the rear of Gelaurudis II had a longer hangar, which was usually where the crew packed their supplies and flew around the shipping routes. Elexis and Maya being called “courier” wasn’t just a code name, but also because they were genuinely in the transporting business.

But the hangar wasn’t stuffed with supplies today. Instead, it was loaded with a two-seater, four wheel drive, off-road land vehicle that could also levitate for a short period of time using space distortion technology. Combined with its

small size, it was suitable for driving through mountainous forests.

“Open it up, courier.”

“Understood. Opening the rear hatch,” Elexis answered.

Once Fasta was in the car, the rear hatch began opening. Wind blew in from outside, shaking the car. Blue skies were in front of her and below was an expansive, mountainous forest.

Gelaurudis II had already left Fornorn and was now in flight. As they passed over the mountain range, the old Vandarion faction battleship temporarily fell out of sight. It was the perfect timing for their departure.

“Deploying spatial distortion field.”

Fasta used the car’s computer and the shaking immediately stopped as a distortion field covered the car and protected it from the wind.

“All right, I’m releasing the fixture,” Elexis announced.

“We haven’t known each other for long, but thank you for this,” Fasta answered. “Please take care of Ralgwin-sama.”

“Leave it to me. I’m the type that doesn’t break a promise.”

“I’m taking off!” After a short farewell, Fasta accelerated the car. It didn’t have all that much power, but it was light, so it flew out of the hangar.

Normally, a car would fall straight down, but because of the distortion field around the vehicle, it slowly descended like a balloon. Before long, the wheels touched down and the car picked up speed.

“All right...”

Fasta had successfully descended. She looked up at Gelaurudis II and saw it slowly depart as its altitude dropped.

Please stay safe, Ralgwin-sama.

Fasta quietly saw it off while turning the car around. She wouldn’t go in the same direction as the ship. Her job was to drive around the forest as a decoy.

Before long, Gelaurudis II descended and landed. Elexis and the others left the ship, knowing that it would be easier to escape on foot through the forest than in the damaged craft. Moreover, the empty ship could be used as a decoy, which should buy them enough time to let Koutarou and the others catch up.

Elexis led the way. “There’s a mountain cottage over here. A safe house we prepared ahead of time. Let’s wait for them out inside.”

They walked down a narrow animal trail. About a quarter of an hour had passed since leaving the ship, but there was no sign of their pursuers. The old Vandarion faction had fallen for the decoy and was not yet searching the area they were in. The battleship that Grevanas was chasing them in had passed by once, but all had been quiet since then.

“Courier...what about Fasta?”

“She’s safe. Her signal is still moving.”

Elexis used his computer to display a map with a moving green marker representing the car that Fasta was in.

But she is probably being chased...

Elexis didn’t tell Ralgwin, but the car’s signal was zigzagging slightly, drastically changing direction at times. Based on that, Fasta was likely dodging bullets while on the run. She was likely also gradually being cornered. There were cliffs and valleys—terrain that was hard to pass—in the direction she was heading. The enemy was corralling her there.

So, Koutarou-kun and the others didn’t make it in time...

Elexis figured that if Koutarou and the others had caught up, there was a chance Fasta could escape. Unfortunately, that hadn’t happened. Still, thanks to Fasta’s efforts they were about to reach the safe house. Elexis prayed for her safety, even though the odds were low, as he led the group onward.

Meanwhile, Fasta was in exactly the situation Elexis was imagining. Being pursued by the old Vandarion faction, the only saving grace was that their battleship wasn’t part of the hunt. It was in the middle of a battle against Hidden Leaves on the other side of the mountain, so they had instead sent a warship detached from the battleship, not unlike Clan’s Cradle. Naturally, this one was better equipped for battle, though, and they’d been attacking her throughout their pursuit. The same kind of ship was likely pursuing Gelaurudis II too.

“It looks like I’m able to fool them...”

Fasta made a sharp turn and looked over at the passenger seat. Ralgwin was sitting there. It wasn’t the real Ralgwin, of course, but a hologram that had been prepared ahead of time. They had predicted that such a thing might be necessary. As a result, the enemy’s attack wasn’t as powerful as it otherwise might have been. They couldn’t attack in a way that would kill Ralgwin, which meant the decoy was working.

Crack.

Then, the frame of the car broke, the part just above Fasta. The pursuing ship was modest with its use of powerful weapons, but there was one that they used freely: the laser cannon. Reigned in by a computer, it wouldn’t hit Ralgwin, nor was it likely to cause an explosion. But there had been plenty of attacks so far that had sent chills down Fasta’s spine, and the laser cannon was responsible for most of them. Even worse, the ship’s AI was studying her and how the car moved, and its aim was becoming more accurate. So Fasta was gradually being cornered.

“Why don’t you give up and hand over Ralgwin-dono?” At times, Grevanas’s voice would sound over the comms.

However, Fasta remained quiet. She didn’t want to talk to him, nor did she want a blunder to tip him off that this Ralgwin was a fake. It would have been strange if Fasta were the only one to answer, after all.

“Very well. It’s not like I can’t understand your loyalty,” he continued. There was seemingly no trace of the insanity that Grevanas had been exuding before. There was an intense tenacity in his eyes, but he seemed to have calmed down, likely thanks to him believing that he was gradually cornering Ralgwin.

I only wish I could see the insanity on that face once more...

If they found out that Ralgwin was a fake, Grevanas would be enraged. But Fasta would likely not get to see it, because she would no longer be alive.

“Shoot the car! Some injuries to Ralgwin-dono will be fine! I can heal a wound or two!” Grevanas announced.

Bang! With a shot from the laser cannon, one of the tires popped. It was a

mercilessly direct hit.

“Oh no!” Fasta cried.

Having lost a tire, the car was jerked off balance and thrown up into the air. She deployed the distortion field to try to stabilize the car, but it had too much momentum. It slammed into the ground, the impact shaking Fasta.

“Fuhahahahahaha! I suppose that might have hurt him too much!”

Before her consciousness sank into the darkness, the last thing Fasta heard was Grevanas’s annoying laughter.

After thirty minutes of walking, Elexis and the others finally reached the safe house. The cottage had been built in a place where it wouldn’t stand out, so there was no fear of being found right away. It was also stocked with plenty of food and water, so it was possible to live there for a period of time without contacting the outside world.

“Ralgwin, the signal from the car Fasta-kun was in just disappeared.”

“I see... What a shame.”

Ralgwin’s shoulders dropped. Fasta had carried out the duty she had taken on. She had rescued him from the Imperial Army and drawn Grevanas away from him by serving as a decoy. He wished that she was there with them, but he knew very well that was too much to ask.

“For someone who turned their fangs against Forthorthe, you seem quite taken with that girl, Ralgwin,” Elexis observed.

“I was only fighting against Forthorthe to repay a benefactor. But Fasta is the daughter of a different benefactor.”

Ralgwin had been fighting to help his uncle, Vandarion. After Vandarion died, Ralgwin had merely chosen to aim for victory in his place. None of this was for Ralgwin’s sake. And Fasta was the daughter of a man who had saved him when he was a green soldier, so protecting her wasn’t for his own sake either.

“You were probably born into the wrong family. I was kind of the same,” said Elexis.

“Ah, that’s right, you are the scion of DKI.”

“That’s ‘former scion’ now. After all, Koutarou-kun has taken over DKI,” Elexis replied with a shrug.

A beeping sound suddenly rang through the cottage. It was a communicator in a corner of the room, signaling an incoming call.

“Who could that be?” Maya, who had been quiet up until now, approached the communicator with a stern expression. She had a bad feeling about it, since no one should have been able to contact them. She flipped the switch with caution.

“It has been a while, Ralgwin-dono,” came a voice.

“Grevanas?! What do you want?!” cried Ralgwin.

“You already know the answer. Will you return to us?”

“I have no intention of doing that.”

Ralgwin understood the situation. He knew what Grevanas was really after, and he wasn’t reckless enough to return without a plan, knowing that he would be used as a sacrifice.

“Naturally, I won’t ask that you come for nothing. It will be in exchange for her.” Grevanas pointed behind him, and Ralgwin’s eyes opened wide. Fasta lay on the floor behind him.

“Fasta!”

“We chanced upon each other unexpectedly and I invited her back.”

“Release her immediately!”

“If that is what you want...but she would die before reuniting with you. As you can see I haven’t treated her.”

Fasta lay in a red puddle of blood. She had been badly injured when the car was destroyed and her wounds had yet to be tended. Her life was in a precarious situation.

Upon seeing that, Ralgwin was outraged. “How about you protect the rights of your prisoners?!”

“No matter what you say, she is no longer a soldier. Legally, she would be considered a terrorist. You should be grateful she hasn’t been killed already.” Grevanas smiled happily, but he was secretly relieved. *As I’d hoped, this girl is special to him. That was a close call...*

When Grevanas had fallen for the decoy, he had thought it was all over. So his last gamble had been to use Fasta as a hostage. He knew there was a possibility that it would work, but hadn’t known for sure. It wasn’t until he could see Ralgwin’s reaction that he finally felt the weight lift.

“Very well, I accept your terms,” said Ralgwin. “Where should I go?”

“I will send over the coordinates, and I’ll have her treated as well.”

With that, the call ended, Ralgwin having agreed to his enemy’s demands. He had no other recourse.

“But you can’t, Ralgwin!” Elexis objected. “You know what will happen if you go!”

“If I don’t, Fasta will die.”

“Is she that important to you?!”

“Yes. Just as she risked her life to protect me, I will protect her.”

“Ralgwin... I understand. I’m sure this is a strange twist of fate, but we will accompany you to the end.”

Elexis wondered what would he would do if it were Maya, and in the end, he had to help.

The location Grevanas had set for the meeting was a junction on a two-lane road that ran through the forest. With no other roads around, it stood out in the forest.

Grevanas and his men had already arrived, and a warship was anchored there.

“That’s strange. Why did they come in a ship like that?” Ralgwin wondered.

“It seems their battleship is stuck in combat with the Blue Knight,” Elexis replied.

“Is Grevanas planning on sacrificing everything for this?”

“So, how is your body holding up?”

“I can finally move as I want. Not that I am in top form.”

“You should probably keep using the PAF.” Elexis passed a handgun to him.

“Yes, I intend to.” Ralgwin accepted the handgun and checked to make sure it was working before putting it away. He had no intention of keeping to the deal. He would pretend to obey while trying to save Fasta.

“As I’m sure you’re already aware, your chances are low. Especially against that Grand Wizard...” Maya commented. She saw it as next to impossible to save Faasta. If the infamous Grand Wizard had the powers of legend, she couldn’t imagine him being outsmarted here.

“Whatever happens will happen. I simply don’t have the option of running away.”

“It’s not like I don’t know how you feel,” Maya conceded.

“Let’s go, courier.”

“Yeah. Jeez, guess I drew the short straw again...” Elexis murmured.

With Ralgwin in the lead, they slowly approached the junction, where they found Grevanas, the Gray Knight, and an unconscious Fasta laid against a nearby tree.

Courier... Ralgwin looked back and signaled Elexis with his eyes. He was going to leave Fasta up to them.

Elexis wordlessly nodded back.

“I am glad you returned of your own accord, Ralgwin-dono.” Grevanas smiled as Ralgwin approached, although it was hard to tell what constituted a smile on his dried-out face.

“To think I’d ever lay eyes on your ugly face again, Grevanas...” In fact, Ralgwin didn’t think it even was a smile. All he felt was Grevanas’s joy at having

cornered his prey.

“How harsh.”

“Fasta better be alive.”

“Of course. Those are the terms of the deal.”

Grevanas turned around and snapped his fingers. It was a dry sound, like slapping two sticks together.

“Ugh...uuuh...” As that sound rang out, Fasta started moving. With a quiet groan her head started swaying. The spell that had stolen her consciousness had been released.

“Fasta...”

“R-Ralgwin-sama? Where am... What was I...”

Fasta’s last memories were of her car being hit and destroyed. Yet she was still alive and Ralgwin was now in front of her. Fasta was confused, unable to process the situation.

“We can leave the details for later. Can you stand?”

“Y-Yes...” She pushed against the tree she was leaning against and stood up. Intense pain shot through her body as she did, and her face twisted into a grimace. She had been treated but was still covered in wounds.

“That’s quite enough. I have held up my end of the deal. Now it is your turn,” Grevanas told them.

“I know. Courier, they haven’t done tampered with Fasta, have they?”

“She has been treated, but it doesn’t look like they have done anything else,” Maya answered, referring to magic. With much of her body having been replaced with machinery, her magic abilities had been greatly decreased, but she was still able to see mana just as well as before.

“I see...” said Ralgwin. “Grevanas, I’m coming to you. Have Fasta walk over.”

“Go ahead, you are free now, girl,” Grevanas announced.

Hearing that, Fasta finally understood the situation. Ralgwin was sacrificing

himself to save her.

“You can’t, Ralgwin-sama! Their goal is to—”

“Leave the details for later. You will go to the Courier.”

“Ral—”

Fasta attempted to object further, but halfway through, she realized that he didn’t have the eyes of someone who was planning to sacrifice himself. His eyes were calm and strong-willed.

Ralgwin-sama is trying to do something...in which case...

“I understand.” Fasta gave up on objecting and started walking like she was told. She didn’t want to make a fuss and end up getting in his way. If there was even a slight chance for them to walk out of there together, she would desperately hold back her concern for him and continue walking.

“They’re planning something,” the Gray Knight warned Grevanas.

“I can imagine. They would be incompetent otherwise. Now, what exactly will you do?”

The Gray Knight and Grevanas had both realized that Ralgwin was trying to escape. They would have done the same if their roles were reversed, so the pair remained focused on their surroundings.

With many people looking on, Ralgwin and Fasta slowly closed the distance between them. Because of her injuries, Fasta was walking slowly, so Ralgwin was the first to reach the middle point.

When Fasta arrived soon after, he whispered to her, “No matter what happens next, keep walking straight forward and don’t look behind you...”

“Ralgwin-sama?”

“Do you understand?”

“Yes...”

With that, Fasta and Ralgwin passed by one another, and the distance between them began to grow once more.

Something's wrong... I thought he would take the girl and retreat... Grevanas was sure that whatever Ralgwin was planning would happen when he and Fasta passed each other. He'd been prepared to cast a spell at that instant. But the moment had passed without anything of note occurring.

Just as he was musing over the situation....

"Grevanas, you are indeed a Grand Wizard with an abundance of experience. You will do anything to win. But you don't understand—this is how you truly do anything to win!"

Ralgwin pulled his handgun out. Grevanas scoffed when he saw that.

"You call that a means to victory?! I am disappointed in you, Ralgwi—Impossible?!"

His confidence soon changed to despair. The gun that Ralgwin had pulled out wasn't pointed at Grevanas, but at his own head.

"Stop that, Ralgwin! Your life belongs to more than just you!"

"Too bad, Grevanas! Your wish will never come true!"

Bang! The trigger was pulled and a bullet was fired. Red blood shot out, and Ralgwin's body slowly collapsed.

When Grevanas saw that, he started running. "Maxfern-sama!!! Aaaaahhhhh, Maxfern-samaaaaa!!!"

Grevanas's greatest weakness was clear: the destruction of Ralgwin's body, which was supposed to be a sacrifice for Maxfern. If the head was damaged, then it would be impossible to affix Maxfern's soul to the body. Not even the waste that Grevanas had developed could regenerate the complex structure of the brain. It was fundamentally different from regenerating an arm, which only needed its shape replicated. So to Grevanas, Ralgwin's death felt like Maxfern's. Half-mad, all he could think of was running over to the body.

"Yurika, now!" came Koutarou's voice.

"Recall Precast—Teleport!" Yurika cried.

Koutarou had been waiting for the moment when Grevanas wasn't acting like

a Grand Wizard. Using Yurika's spell to close the distance in an instant, he swung Signaltin at his foe with a yell.

Ralgwin had been the one to come up with this plan, and Elexis had used the court magicians to pass the information along. The only problem was whether or not Koutarou and the others could reach them in time. If they had been too focused on fighting the battleship, everything would have been ruined, given how big of a gamble it was for Ralgwin.

"The Blue Knight?!" screamed Grevanas.

Ralgwin's gamble had been successful. When Koutarou and the others had realized that Grevanas wasn't aboard the battleship, they had given chase. And Koutarou's timing for the attack had been perfect. Grevanas's attention had been fully on Ralgwin, so he'd been caught completely off guard and was unable to defend himself.

As the slash came his way, Grevanas raised his left arm to protect himself, and it was promptly cut off, falling to the ground and disintegrating as if nothing had ever been there.

Koutarou didn't hesitate. He swung his sword once more to cut down Grevanas himself. But before the lethal attack could connect, the Gray Knight's sword blocked it. Unlike Grevanas, the Gray Knight hadn't been shaken by Ralgwin's actions. The death of somebody he didn't care about was of no importance to him, so he had the composure to think ahead. Having known that it might be a diversion, he was able to block Koutarou's second strike.

"Agh, the Gray Knight! Hey, you help out too, young master!" Koutarou called to Elexis.

"Don't call me that, Koutarou-kun!" The rifle in Elexis' hands was fired repeatedly at their enemies.

Even the Gray Knight had his hands full trying to protect himself and Grevanas. He increased the power of chaos and repelled the bullets while Maya collected Fasta and retreated. The remaining problem was the fallen Ralgwin.

"How long are you going to pretend to be sleeping, Ralgwin?!" said Koutarou, grabbing hold of the man's hand while Elexis kept the enemy in check. And, of

all things, the hand grabbed him back.

“Well, come, Blue Knight!” Ralgwin answered.

“Your kind really is the most dangerous type.”

“Y-You were alive, Ralgwin!” Grevanas stammered.

“You can’t call suicide a decent plan. You slipped up, Grevanas.”

“D-Damn youuu!!!”

It was then that Grevanas finally realized he had been tricked. Ralgwin hadn’t killed himself; the bullet in the gun had been a paintball. It was a toy to make it look like he had committed suicide. Grevanas would normally not have been fooled, but with this being the grand finale, there had been a slight opening in his mind. He was a Grand Wizard who struck fear into many. Moreover, he had been turned undead, but he still had some slight human weaknesses.

“If this is your decision, I have an idea of my own!” Grevanas said.

His humiliation and anger with Ralgwin destroyed the last shred of humanity left in him. He slowly stood up and raised the staff in his hand up high.

“Kyaaaaaaaa!” screamed Fasta. In that moment, her body was stained crimson. The wounds closed by Grevanas’s spell had opened all at once. Unable to withstand the pain and blood loss, she fell on the spot, and a pool of blood formed on the ground once more.

“Fasta?!”

“Don’t move, Ralgwin! Or I might undo the spells I’ve cast on her organs and bones as well!” Grevanas warned them. The mummy-like face appeared to be laughing. It was impossible to read any emotions in his sunken eyes, but the insanity in them was clear.

“So, this is it...” Ralgwin finally acknowledged defeat. He hadn’t lost his battle; in fact, he’d won it. But this was someone he had to protect no matter what. His defeat came from his inability to discard his humanity.

“Ralgwin!” yelled Koutarou.

“Sorry about this, since you came all this way. But I will return to the old

Vandarion faction.”

“If you do that, you—”

“I know. But there are some things I just can’t abandon. Aren’t you the same, Blue Knight?”

“That’s...”

Ralgwin would be able to live with it if he simply abandoned Fasta. Could that even be called a victory? What remained if he gave up what was important to him in order to survive? Wouldn’t it be the same as dying? That was why he chose a shorter but more meaningful life over extending it for as long as possible.

“That is a good answer, Ralgwin-dono. I am sure your allies waiting for you back at the stronghold will rejoice too,” Grevanas calmly replied, satisfied with the other’s decision. But everyone understood that a cruel insanity was behind the calm facade.

“Courier, take care of Fasta,” Ralgwin told Elexis.

“Got it.”

“I won’t be able to protect her anymore.”

“Ralgwin...” Koutarou started.

“Don’t turn out like me, Blue Knight.” Ralgwin glanced at the Gray Knight, who was saying nothing, simply watching events play out.

“Let’s go, Ralgwin-dono. Everyone is awaiting your return.” Grevanas took the lead and started walking. He had no more business there. He had lost his left arm, and provoking the Blue Knight further could be a bad idea, so he preferred to run while they were weakened.

“I know. I’m not going to disobey.” Ralgwin looked at Fasta one last time, then followed Grevanas. “You too Knight-dono,”

The Gray Knight silently sheathed his sword and followed the other two. Neither Koutarou nor the others moved. If they did, Fasta would be killed. All they could do was see the three off with a strong sense of defeat.



When Fasta woke up, she was inside a spaceship. She was confused at first but soon recalled what had happened. She had failed to save Ralgwin, and he had ended up saving her instead.

Maya filled her in on what had happened while she was unconscious. "...it seems the Blue Knight was shocked too. He was supposed to catch us, but he just left without saying anything."

After giving Fasta emergency treatment, Koutarou's group had entrusted her to Elexis and Maya and then left. The two couriers had brought Fasta to their spaceship and left the Forthorthe system. Whatever their plans, they needed to get Fasta proper treatment first, but since all three of them were fugitives, it would be dangerous to do that near the capital.

"I see... So, what happened to Ralgwin-sama?"

"He is the biggest news in Forthorthe."

"What do you mean?"

"It would be faster for you to see for yourself..." Maya said and brought up some news footage. Every news channel was filled with a familiar face.

"This is a follow-up report on Ralgwin Vester Vandarion, who declared war on the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire. In the Larenzi system, the Forthorthe Liberation army he leads..."

"Ralgwin-sama!" Fasta gasped.

All news contained the same information: Ralgwin had formed a military organization called the Forthorthe Liberation Army and declared war on Forthorthe.

"No... Who is this man? Tell me, courier! Who is this man who looks like Ralgwin-sama?!"

Fasta immediately knew something was wrong. The person the news was referring to as "Ralgwin" was most definitely not him. The light in his eyes was completely different. The Ralgwin she loved didn't have such violent eyes.

"That man is Violbarum Maxfern, the legendary tyrant resurrected and put into Ralgwin's body," said Maya.

Koutarou and the others hadn't been able to protect him. Grevanas had taken him away and used him to resurrect an evil man from two thousand years ago: Violbarum Maxfern, the nemesis of the legendary princess Alaia and the man defeated by the Blue Knight.

Afterword

Long time no see! Takehaya here. Surprisingly it's already been a year since my eye surgery. Things have been going well, and my brain has grown accustomed to it, so I can see more easily now. I did change the lens of the eyes that I've been using for over forty years with intraocular lenses, so it took some time to adjust. If I get new glasses, I think I will be able to see a little better. The ones I'm using now were made just before the surgery, so once I've got some time on my hands, I'd like to get new glasses.

I've also started taking longer rides on my motorcycle again. But I don't plan on going anywhere that would take several hours to reach just yet. Overconfidence is very dangerous, after all.

In summary, the problems with my eyes are resolving themselves. I was worried about getting cataracts at my age, but fortunately, now that things have settled down, it doesn't have any significant impact on my daily life, although I do think my house has gotten a little dusty. I struggle to see small and light-colored objects, so it can be difficult to clean. Well, I suppose that's not too bad. It's best not to be too picky (lol).

Anyway, let's leave my current status at that and move on to this volume. Considering what happened, there will be spoilers this time. For those of you who tend to read the afterword first, I suggest that you come back after finishing the volume.

This installment covers the transfer of Ralghwin, who was captured last volume, and various things happen in the process. People are after him, so he must be moved from the hospital to an isolated facility. Koutarou and the others do what they can to prevent that.

This volume, the enemy launches their attacks, but their way of fighting is fundamentally different from before. This time, Grevanas uses spiritual energy and magic just like Koutarou's side. In other words, the same things that made Koutarou's group so strong now apply to Grevanas as well.

Their strength was their ability to fight while always hitting the enemy where

it hurt. Forthorthe's weapons and armor are powerful, but they are vulnerable to spiritual energy attacks. Spiritual energy, in turn, is vulnerable to a wide variety of interference, and attacks from magic and would easily lose.

Moreover, magic has long chants, while Forthorthe's weapons can quickly and accurately continue to attack, keeping anyone from chanting. And magic relies heavily on talent and effort, which creates the major weakness of not having a lot of users available, limiting the amount of places where it can be deployed. Koutarou and the others used these weaknesses to appropriately attack their enemies. Theia could rain down a hail of bullets against magicians, and Yurika could use magic to exorcize any ghosts.

But now, Grevanas can fight the same way. He is a Grand Wizard and has already gotten his hands on spiritual-energy technology. And as the leader of the old Vandarion faction, he has access to the latest of Forthorthe's technology. That's right, an enemy that can fight on equal terms against Koutarou and the others has finally appeared.

Ralgwin was close, but he hurried to fight too soon and lost as a result. Excluding the whirlpool of chaos, this is the first enemy that can fight on equal terms with our protagonists since Elexis, and Grevanas isn't restrained by morals. The result is that havoc is wreaked in this volume. And to top it all off, Maxfern returns. That adds Maxfern's leadership to the already existing science, spiritual energy, and magic, which is a very powerful threat if left unchecked. Koutarou and the others have a hard fight ahead of time, so look forward to what happens next.

Speaking of which, what will I do for the next volume? I skipped it last year because of my surgery, but it might be time for a *Hercules* volume. Thanks to the efforts of Nalfa's brother, Koutarou is being cornered in another sense too (lol).

But that's about all the space I have this time. I'd like to conclude with my usual greetings: I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to everyone in the HJ publishing department and related companies for their cooperation in publishing this book, to my illustrator Poco-san, who drew my requests despite suddenly my mentioning pirates, and to all of the readers who have kept up for forty-three volumes.

Let us meet again in Volume 44.

June, 2023

Takehaya